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A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH  
TO LITERARY CRITICISM



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# A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM

BY

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## PREFACE

### I

**D**URING my earliest readings in the history of critical theory I was considerably impressed with the conflicting and contradictory principles of literary criticism. Subsequent study in this field has strengthened this impression, bringing with it the realization that only a new, objective, and scientific approach to critical theory can ever bring anything significantly universal out of the present chaos. The traditional philosophic and æsthetic approaches to critical theory seem little more than earnest sophistry; both must depend upon psychology for their fundamental data, and neither is making any thorough effort to enlist the services of the psychologist. Why not, I asked myself, a purely psychological approach? My attempt at formulating such an approach was unsuccessful because my own command of experimental data was inadequate to solve my critical problems. A search for a more competent psychology indicated quite convincingly why so little had been accomplished toward formulating a psychological critical theory: there seemed to be no data pointedly pertinent to the solution of the problems in criticism.

During a discussion of Gestalt psychology with Dr. Maier one evening I sensed the possibility of making an application of it to the solution of certain critical problems. Subsequent discussions indicated that his experimental work on reasoning (productive thinking) would make a distinct contribution to establishing an objective critical theory. Criticism has always attempted to establish the nature and value of imaginative



interpretations of life; but because of the scarcity of data on the exact nature of productive thinking, purely theoretical discussion on the subject has been profuse and chaotic. This book is the result of a decision to effect a genuine collaboration in an effort to set up a flexible and objective system of critical theory.

H. WILLARD RENINGER

## II

Many trained readers will come to this book with an appreciation of literary art that I can never hope to attain. For one whose background is so entirely different from that of those with literary training, even the hope of contributing to literary criticism may seem very bold indeed. I therefore confess at the outset my complete ignorance of traditional literary theory. I venture the essay because I believe that my ignorance of literary theory may be the very thing to make it possible to be suggestive in this field.

I was once told by one of the foremost contributors to experimental psychology that the best training for the science of psychology was training in any scientific field other than psychology. It is difficult to approach problems in an original manner when one is handicapped by many older notions of how a problem should be attacked. One is more prone to imitate or to modify an older approach than to begin all over again. A knowledge of the historical development of any subject often stifles original work in that field.

Throughout the writing of this book I refrained from reading other treatments of the subject with which this book is concerned. I had no notion of the problems and their difficulties. The presentation of the problems was made entirely by Professor Reninger. I merely tried to solve them as I should any problem in my field. We then discussed the merits of attempts at solutions that had been made. The judgment of the value of any explanation to critical theory was left entirely to my col-



laborator whom I always assumed to be the more reliable judge.

Data from the science of psychology have been used as the foundation of our theory. These data, however, are often inadequate, and the completed system is consequently largely theoretical. I hope that our readers will therefore regard this system of criticism merely as an attempt to be suggestive.

Philosophically we have taken a pragmatic position. This is because any system of values must be fundamentally pragmatic.

NORMAN R. F. MAIER

We wish to express our appreciation for the sympathetic and critical reading of the manuscript by Professor Thomas E. Rankin of Carleton College, Professor Amos R. Morris of the University of Michigan, and Professor Charles Frederick Harrold of the Michigan State Normal College.

H. W. R.  
N. R. F. M.

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PART I  
INTRODUCTION

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# A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM

## CHAPTER I

### THE PRESENT FUNCTION OF CRITICISM

THE only reason for formulating a literary theory is the desire to influence critical practice and, subsequently, literature itself. Knowledge that brings about no desirable changes in human behavior is valueless.

It is not only the present chaos in literary theory that proves to be so disturbing, but also the appalling confusion in critical practice. An examination of even our best critical journals reveals a heterogeneous body of criticism based on personal opinions which are many times diametrically opposed to one another. Let us choose at random for purposes of analysis a few examples of contemporary criticism.

In reviewing Christopher Morley's *Swiss Family Manhattan*, the critic makes the following points: "It is a difficult 'stunt' to tell a story in the first person of an eccentric specialist in card catalogues, for the story has to be told anyhow, whatever happens to the eccentric. But it is good to hear the voice of Mr. Morley, even behind the masque of his protagonist." The book is not a novel; "properly classified, it is the excellent old 'stunt' practiced by Swift and Voltaire . . . usually for the purposes of satire. . . . But Mr. Morley is too kindly and amused to be a satirist with poison in his sting. . . .



My impression is that Mr. Morley writes too much and too easily to reach the heights of his possibilities. There is all his customary charm in this book, but it seems a little casual and frail. . . . As a novelist he does not seem to grip anything very hard.”<sup>1</sup> These statements are the most pertinent critical judgments in the review; they have not been selected because they are the ones most easily attacked.

What has the critic said that would in any way inform the reader of the fundamental value of Mr. Morley’s book? There is no evaluation of the language patterns or of the dominant idea. The critic gives no reason why the book should or should not be read: he simply talks vaguely about Mr. Morley and less vaguely about his “story.” What the critic has presented is not criticism at all; it is merely talk that might have been heard during a light and airy dinner party.

A consideration of one of the most startling pieces of contemporary criticism of an important book will further establish our point concerning the inadequate practice of modern critics. In reviewing Halvdan Koht’s *The Life of Ibsen*, the critic finally records this judgment *after* writing two full columns of irrelevant material: “Professor Koht’s admirable book, almost idolatrous in its attitude toward Ibsen’s genius, tells frankly and honestly the story of his life; and the explanations of the origins and sources of the plays are of great value.”<sup>2</sup> In writing two and one-half columns the critic actually writes only thirty-six words of evaluation, and these are not concerned with the main issue of the book.

<sup>1</sup> *The Saturday Review of Literature*, VIII: 25, p. 439.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, p. 455.



One more illustration. In reviewing Edna Ferber's *American Beauty*, the critic tells us that here Miss Ferber has "the stuff of which to make a novel."<sup>3</sup> This "stuff" is the decay of the New England middle-class mind. If the critic is basing this judgment on a principle, the judgment is quite meaningless; for there are other "stuffs" out of which to make novels, and hence the principle is invalidated. If this judgment is not based on a critical principle, it is personal opinion and should be labeled as such.

Further, we are told that Miss Ferber's novel might have been great "except for Miss Ferber's curse. She was not content to let New England tell its own story, to take a house and family and let them change and decay as they have in truth done. She must needs introduce a romantic interest. . . . It is all rather a pity. But it will undoubtedly sell. Even to those persons whose roots are in New England, who like a good, rousing story about their home land, and do not object to a bit of love interest thrown in."<sup>4</sup> We gather from this that "romantic interests" spoil novels. We wonder why.

Although we do not expect the reader to generalize on the above cases, we are quite certain that by recalling his experiences in reading critical journals he will convince himself of the truth of our generalization. A recollection of his past experiences will quickly reveal the varied concepts of the function of criticism; but most of all it will demonstrate that contemporary criticism has become quite meaningless because personal

<sup>3</sup> *The Nation*, 133: 3460, p. 462.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.



opinion has, in most cases, been confused with objective critical evaluation.

It is strange that our critical practice should be so completely out of step with our scientific age. What other profession, hopeful of making a contribution to civilization, would tolerate a body of mere personal opinion on any one of its fundamental problems? Picture, if you can, the medical profession evaluating a cancer cure with the personal-opinion method used by the literary critics. Imagine a dozen bridge engineers arguing, from personal opinion, the required strength of a bridge to carry a given maximum load.

It is difficult to determine all the causes of the chaos in current critical practice; but we can be quite sure that much of it is due to a definite reaction against the confusion in the history of literary theory. The theories of Coleridge, Hazlitt, Pater, Taine, Sainte-Beuve, and others may be interesting in themselves, or profitable because of the light they throw upon the creative works of their time; but surely no one today can be satisfied with the brilliant guesses of these men, especially when it is known that one system of guesses contradicts another. And to argue that one may, in eclectic fashion, choose the best from these men is merely to evade the problem; for then we face the question, what objective justification is there for the basis of one's method of choice? Hence the contemporary critic, having experienced the confusion and quarrels of the giants, quite rightly assumes that one man's opinion is as good as another's.

Classified broadly, all present-day critics fall into one of two groups: the first, those who see no hope of ever establishing critical standards, commonly referred to as



impressionists; and the second, those who feel that standards must be set up if critical practice is to justify the energy, time, and thought put into it.

Although impressionism is not new to literary theory, it has recently become a strong influence in critical practice. Goethe, Carlyle, Pater, France—all of them were impressionists, with certain reservations. But J. E. Spingarn, in an imaginary dialogue between an impressionist and a “dogmatist,” to some extent sums up the impressionistic point of view in his essay, “Creative Criticism”: “To have sensations in the presence of a work of art and to express them, that is the function of Criticism for the impressionistic critic. His attitude he would express somewhat in this fashion: ‘Here is a beautiful poem, let us say Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. To read it is for me to experience a thrill of pleasure. My delight in it is itself a judgment, and what better judgment is it possible for me to give? All that I can do is to tell how it affects me, what sensations it gives me. Other men will derive other sensations from it, and express them differently; they too have the same right as I. Each of us, if we are sensitive to impressions and express ourselves well, will produce a new work of art to replace the work which gave us our sensations. That is the art of Criticism, and beyond that Criticism cannot go.’ ”<sup>5</sup>

It is indeed surprising that the impressionist has even retained the word “criticism,” so clean a sweep has he made of all critical method. Impressionism denies even the possibility of communication, because different persons’ impressions may vary, and the same person in dif-

<sup>5</sup> From *Criticism in America* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1924), pp. 11-12.



ferent moods may have different impressions. If the impressions, or sensations, are delightful, the art is good; if they are not, the art is bad. And no matter the delight or absence of it, if one expresses himself well while reporting his sensations, the criticism is adequate. Impressionistic criticism, then, is almost entirely a matter of expression; that is, one's ability as a critic of literature is directly proportional to his ability as a linguistic technician. The impressionist seems never to question his ability to understand what the artist is attempting to do, which of course precludes any question of evaluation whatsoever; for understanding is always the requisite of evaluation. Of course the impressionist can evaluate his sensations: they are either delightful or not delightful. But in evaluating his sensations instead of the work of art, he is denying the function of criticism in order to justify his own criticism. If the impressionist is at all concerned with being consistent in his evaluations of other experiences in life, he must conclude that anything not delightful is bad. Delight then becomes the basis of evaluation for all experience, an objective justification of which Mr. Spingarn or any other impressionist does not furnish.

Impressionism fails because it evades the central problem of literary criticism; that is, what is the value of the literary experience? If literature is regarded as a distraction, or as a momentary sensuous pleasure, or as a pastime, then impressionism is an adequate critical method. If literature is seen as a contribution to civilized man's increasing understanding of himself and his world, then impressionism cannot be taken seriously.

Although the second group of contemporary critics con-



fess the need for objective standards, they disagree on the kind of technique to be used in establishing them. In the past these disagreements have resulted, in part, from the lack of objective knowledge upon which to build the standards. There have been men, like Coleridge for example, who, having been dissatisfied with mere personal opinion as a critical method, have attempted to establish critical principles on a philosophical basis. Although we cannot accept many of Coleridge's principles in view of the scientific knowledge found since his time, we must admire his demand for a more objective critical method. He not only made such a demand, but he set to work and produced the most illuminating treatment of the imagination now to be found in literary theory. Were Coleridge alive today, there is every reason to believe that he would utilize our present psychological data to revise his critical theory. Coleridge was outstanding because he refused to believe that literary criticism could experience no further significant progress.

The unfortunate thing about impressionism is that its spirit is one of giving up. Because there are no fundamental objective standards, it implies that there can be none. Objective criticism, no matter how faulty, is at least a spirit in criticism that encourages progress. Science has had many reversals, but each objective discovery has been a forward stride. As soon as the desire for permanency is lost, a period of sterility is inevitable.

Criticism has long carried with it much mysticism and belief in the unexplainable. We must not—we cannot—understand or explain intuition, inspiration, genius, and creative imagination. They are the gifts of the gods and must be accepted on faith. So long as this spirit prevails,

criticism must remain in the dark ages. The above words (intuition, etc.) refer to the experiences and abilities of men. As such, these words can and must be given naturalistic connotations, otherwise we must grant that psychology is not a science. Since physiologists and psychologists insist that they are working in the realms of science, and consequently insist that all behavior and conscious states are explainable by natural law (and they have given us many substantial natural explanations of past magic), it is only reasonable that we accept this opinion as a working hypothesis for literary criticism. The present volume will therefore not use words of a mystical nature: it holds itself responsible, however, to account for all behavior and experiences that are implied by them.



## CHAPTER II

### DEFINITIONS: WRITING, RHETORIC, AND CRITICISM

SINCE the terms *writing*, *rhetoric*, and *criticism* have been used to cover such a heterogeneous number of meanings throughout the history of critical theory, it seems necessary to define them carefully if the readers and writers of these pages are to begin on a common ground. Our definitions, of course, have followed logically from the formulation of our complete critical theory: the theory was not built upon preëstablished definitions. To forestall undue complication at this point of the discussion and to furnish the reader with immediate insight into our point of view, we shall reverse the above process by presenting first the definitions of writing and rhetoric and then their justification. The definition and function of criticism can best be treated after we have discussed the nature and purpose of writing.

Writing is the communication of thought through language, the presentation of which is disciplined by psychological law. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is the science which attempts to discover the general laws of written communication; it endeavors to describe the laws of human discourse. To put it dynamically, rhetoric attempts to point out the general patterns of symbol relationship which will most effectively allow the artist's thought to be experienced by the reader with the least possible interference. Consequently it provides us with a



body of laws, an intelligent observance of which will properly discipline writing. It should be the desire of the writer to apply these laws when he wishes others to understand him.

One who attempts to discover the rhetorical laws is a rhetorician. One who uses them, either consciously or unconsciously, to discipline literary communication is a writer. The first is an analyzer, a scientist, one who is seeking the laws of writing; the second is a synthesizer, a maker of discourse, any one who communicates to others. Rhetoric, then, is a science, not in the strict sense that physics is a science, but in the broader sense of subjecting its conclusions to the tests of verification and demonstration.

The term *writing* may be used to describe two types of communication: (1) writing which is merely correct (utilitarian writing) and (2) writing which is a work of literary art (æsthetic writing). Any intelligent individual may be taught to write with relative clarity and precision. For example, a person may observe and understand a complete scientific experiment. If he finds it difficult to communicate his observations to others, then an efficient teacher of writing, a rhetorical technician, can teach him to record his observations so that an intelligent reader will understand exactly what the writer saw and understood.

Correct writing, then, is clear, precise writing which attempts no personal evaluation or interpretation; it is writing which endeavors to remain entirely objective.

We all know, however, that all writers are not content merely to write correctly. We see that the writing of some is grammatically good, that it is clear, that it economizes the attention of the reader—but we recognize that



it is something more. Their writing interprets and evaluates experience. Such writing comes from artists: their works we call art.

The artist, when confronted with a situation, may interpret that situation. He may look upon a street corner in the depths of a Chinese district, at dusk: if he paints the street corner with oils, or presents it in words, we shall get his interpretation of it. He may see as the most valuable thing there a young urchin looking mistily into the chaos of his own environment; the artist sees disappointment in his face; the boy is sad and appears neglected. This detail will evoke within the artist an interpretation that will dominate all the rest of the artist's observation of the scene. Hence for him the remainder of that picture will probably emphasize the urchin's mental condition: the scene will appear somber, deserted, and hopeless. Details which would otherwise appear bright and cheery have faded and become tarnished; that is, they *seem* faded and tarnished because the artist feels so keenly the urchin's longings and regrets.

A photographic reproduction of this same street corner would reveal in itself no such picture as that given by the artist. No matter how the urchin felt, the camera would record the scene exactly as it existed in so far as its own media permit: if the restaurant on the opposite side of the street were brilliantly lighted, it would remain so in the photographic reproduction; while the effect of the child on the artist may cause the restaurant to appear much less brilliant. The fundamental point to be made here is that all art is an interpretation, an evaluation, of our experiences. Because a camera cannot evaluate (i.e., it exhibits no affective reactions), it cannot produce



works of art: these must proceed from human beings capable of interpreting and crystallizing the universal characteristics of experience. We understand then that correct writing is to artistic writing as the photographic reproduction is to the oil painting.

Once the artist has made his interpretation,<sup>1</sup> he may find it desirable to communicate it to others for their understanding and examination. He therefore transfers it to a concrete medium such as canvas and colors, or stone, or wood, or rhythm and melody, or words. For the artist's own experience no concrete medium is necessary: the work of art, for him, is already in his mind. If we are to experience his configuration, he must communicate it to us. That is, he must set up certain concrete symbols, or substitute objects, which will act as stimuli, which will in turn produce in us approximately the same interpretation experienced by the artist. The individual receiving the stimuli from the artist in the form of concrete symbols, such as words (in literature) or colors and shadings and lines (in painting), must be capable of responding to these symbols in such a manner that he will catch the artist's experience.

Diagrammatically, the above explanation appears as in Figure 1.

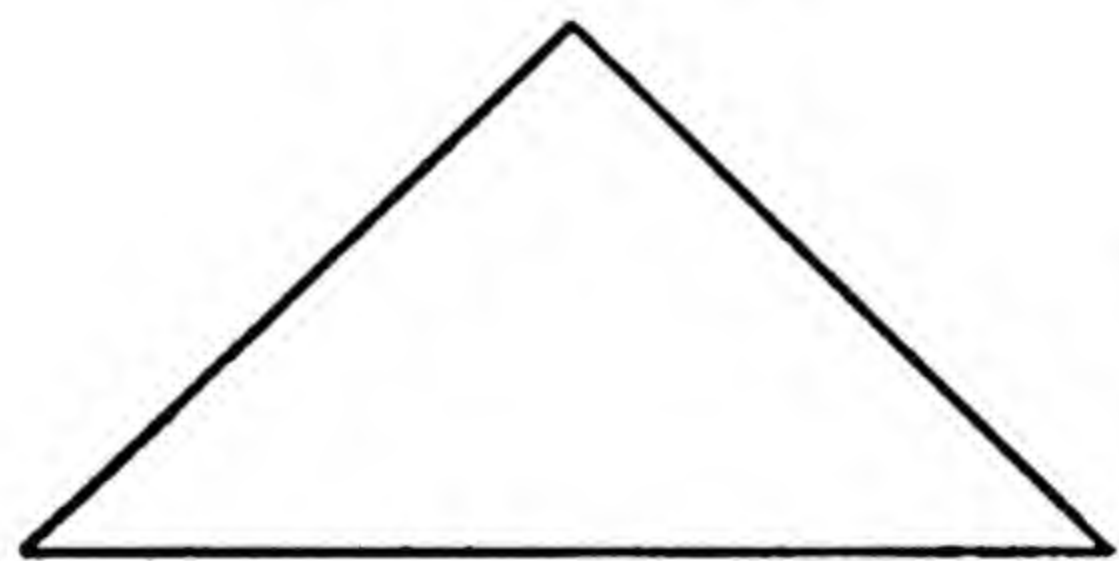
Step 1 represents an unformed mass of stimuli. These set up nerve impulses on the retina (in the case of the eye), and the end result is a visual experience—an object on a certain background. The object is the result of a specific grouping of part of the mass of sensations which

<sup>1</sup> This does not necessarily imply that the artist may not alter his interpretation as he writes: we are simply saying that the dominant idea exists before he begins to write.



Step 1

Mass of Stimuli



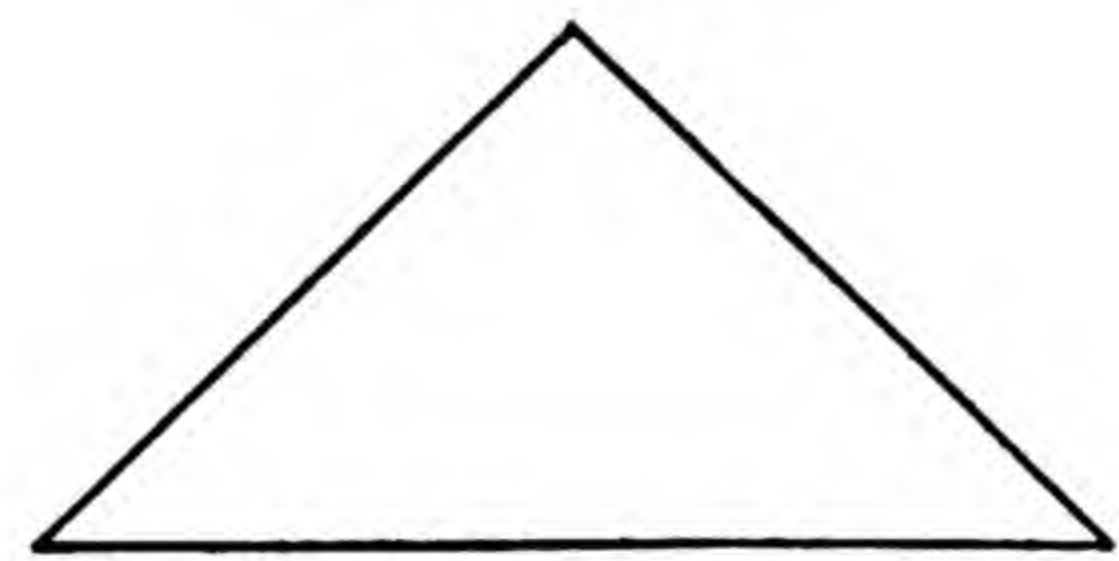
Step 2

Artist's Interpretation



Step 3

Artist's Symbols



Step 4

Reader's Interpretation

FIG. 1.



are aroused by the stimuli; while the remainder of the mass of sensations fall back and become the background. What the artist sees, then, is determined by the nature of the grouping that his organism makes from the sensations, which are in turn determined by the stimuli that come to him from the outside world: this is his interpretation, or configuration (Step 2). If the artist wishes his interpretation to be experienced by other people, he must present them with a pattern of symbols (Step 3). Because of past conditioning these symbols will produce certain experiences in them. If the symbols function as intended, the experience will approximate that of the writer (Step 4).

We understand, then, that when the artist sees an object it is due to a grouping of sensory experience. Groupings may be of different strengths. Since an object is a very strong grouping, objects are experienced very much in the same way by different people. A grouping which is an interpretation of a whole situation is, however, a less stable grouping. Different relationships are seen because different people may have varying interpretations which result from the same mass of stimuli. Even certain objects, when not satisfying all criteria for a strong grouping, may be experienced by some individuals and not by others. Camouflage is an example of a method used to weaken strong groupings and thus cause objects not to be experienced.

We recall the type of puzzle picture that challenges us to find the hidden man. We fail to find him at first because we get the ordinary grouping which does not include the hidden man. Finally, after trying to shift various lines in order to eliminate the first grouping, we



see him. We understand that we have missed him because certain elements in one organization make up his outline, while in a different organization they are leaves and parts of trees. What we naïvely call reality is thus a function of the way our organism groups or organizes the sensations. (This is the phenomenalist viewpoint in philosophy which is consistent with modern physics and psychology.)

These resultant groupings characterize both scientific and artistic interpretations. They differ not because they are the products of different mental processes, but rather because they are composed of different kinds of data.

In perception, affection (likes and dislikes) plays a part. In scientific observation the affective elements are eliminated as much as possible by varying the conditions of the experiment and the attitude of the observer. Normally, however, our habitual likes and dislikes play a part in what we perceive; that is, there is a strong subjective element in our interpretations of experience due to our past conditioning. It is this subjective element which distinguishes an artist's configuration from a scientist's: the chief difference between a scientific treatise and Conrad's *Lord Jim* is the relative absence of the subjective element in the former and the relative abundance of it in the latter. De Quincey claimed that we have a literature of knowledge and a literature of power; that is, he maintained that great literature should "move" one; there should be a strong emotional appeal. The subjective data are as much a part of the stimuli which finally produce the configuration that we call thought, or an interpretation, as are the objective data. Hence scientific and literary writing fundamentally differ quantitatively only,



the difference being in the relative proportion of subjective elements present in the configuration.

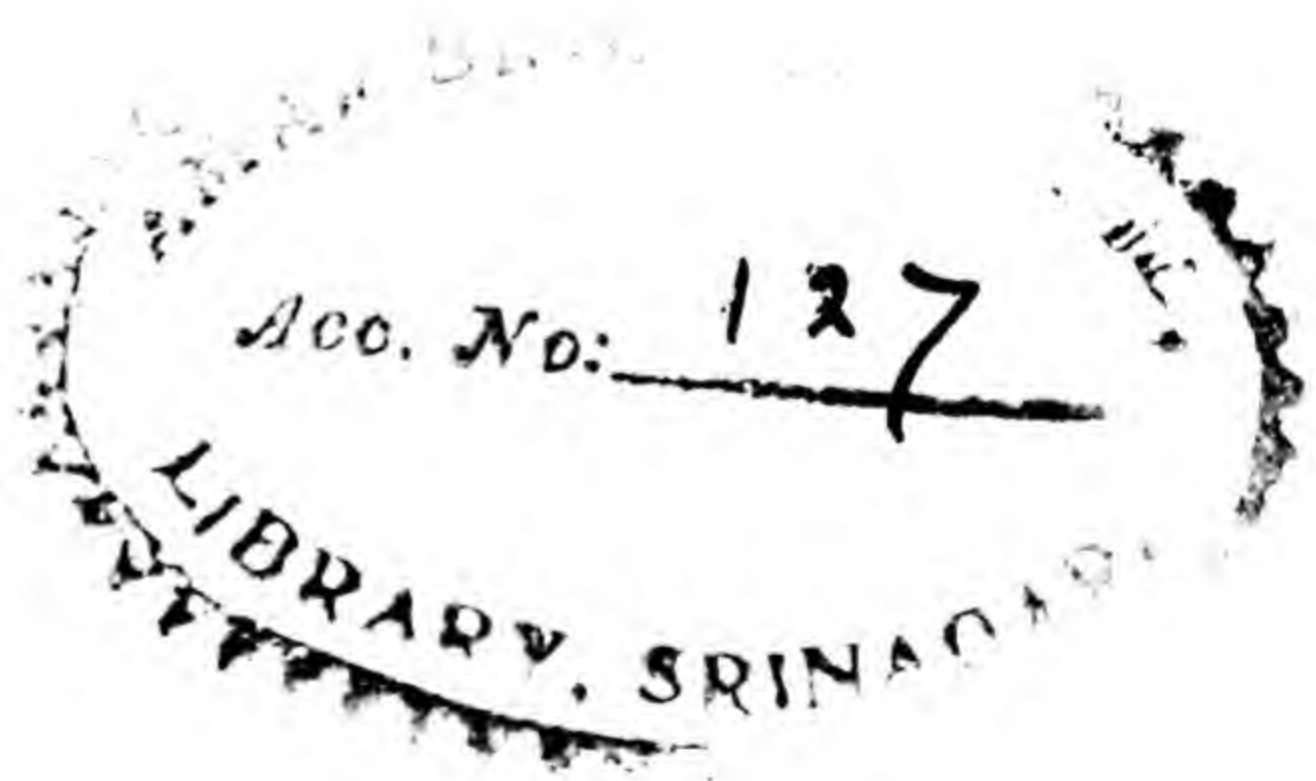
After an artist has experienced a configuration, it is only through concrete symbols that he may give his interpretation to the world. The literary artist must arrange his symbols in such a way as to cause the reader to experience his interpretation. An artist, then, must not only experience a highly desirable interpretation, but he must be able also to communicate his grouping to others. If a writer has a great interpretation to communicate, and his communication is inadequate, no one will ever completely experience his interpretation; for all others he is no artist. There are undoubtedly hundreds of unearthed artists of this kind. If a writer makes only commonplace interpretations, yet possesses an extremely adequate method of communication, he too fails of artistry; for it is the successful combination of both factors that produces great works of art: the interpretation (which contains both objective and subjective factors) must be desirable, and the communicating symbols must cause the reader to catch the artist's configuration.

It seems clear, then, that if we are ever to probe the mystery of genius and its literary art we must understand the human organism and its sensibilities, both for experiencing varied interpretations and for the medium of communication. Apparently science must bring us this understanding. There seems reason enough to believe that scientific research, especially in physiology and psychology, will one day account for every factor in literary creativeness.

We are now in a position to present the definition and function of criticism. Criticism, instead of considering

the disciplinary results of rhetoric only, analyzes, interprets, and evaluates the whole of writing with reference to the entire world of thought and action. Rhetoric concerns itself only with the actual communication. Criticism, to fulfill its complete function, must evaluate both the artist's configurations and his skill in setting up word symbols which will stimulate the reader to experience approximately the artist's configuration. Therefore criticism has three questions to answer: (1) What is the artist's configuration? (2) How valuable is it? (3) How effectively has he communicated it?

The criteria used to judge the whole of a piece of literature are called critical principles. The result of the intelligent application of these principles is called literary criticism. It is the function of the remainder of this book to account for the *source* and *nature* of the critical principles of literature.





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## PART II

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## CHAPTER III

### THE NATURE OF PRODUCTIVE THINKING

WHEN we realize that great literature contributes an essentially new interpretation of some phase of life to its readers, it is not surprising that the results of studies on reasoning should be enlightening to critical theory. The use of the term *reasoning* implies that past experiences have in some way been manipulated and that new relationships have arisen as a result. The writer who effectively communicates something new presupposes a reader who can experience new relationships. Hence the creative writer deals with original interpretations of experiences which he desires to be understood by the reader.

The psychology of reasoning has, in the past, been of little value to creative workers in science and art because it has avoided the very problems with which they are concerned. Psychologists have been greatly impressed by the laws of association because they suggest a simple mechanism which explains many of the mental phenomena. These laws do not, however, account for originality; so rather than admit the inadequacy of association, originality was denied. Consequently all problem solving was explained by mental trial and error or by a mere recalling of what was done in similar situations in the past.

Because of the complexity of the reasoning process, it has been very difficult to locate its fundamental characteristic. Some writers have stressed abstraction and the



formation of concepts as the basic processes; others have regarded reasoning as the ability to recognize likenesses or differences (or both) between different experiences; still others have stressed its selective function and have thus considered reasoning to be the ability to select pertinent past experiences. In the experimental studies of thought processes, much attention has been given to association, imagery, abstraction, and chance (random trial and error) in attempts to study the nature of productive thinking. In most of these studies, the solution of a problem has been reduced to past experiences which were associated together because of contiguity in space or time. This is an atomistic approach to the problem.

Gestalt psychology has, however, emphasized a different phase of reasoning: it has stressed the importance of organization. Seeing the solution to a problem is like suddenly seeing the hidden face in a puzzle picture. As one first looks at the picture, one merely sees leaves and trees because the elements of the picture are arranged to that end; then suddenly a new organization is seen and the hidden face appears. Just what causes the new organization and how it is to be explained, Gestalt psychology does not say; but it does insist that the explanation cannot be reduced to the traditional laws of association.

Because the processes of human reasoning are greatly involved, it seems that perhaps the fundamental characteristic of productive thinking can be better isolated if it is studied in beings less complex than man. If we wish to know what is characteristic of a steam engine, it is unwise to attempt to analyze a modern complicated engine. That which seems to be very important in such an engine may



be only incidental to the principle involved. To discover the principle of the steam engine, we are wise to examine the simplest engine which involves the principle; for there the fundamental principle is not so thoroughly imbedded in other structures. Hence, in the study of reasoning it may be wise to turn to the study of animal behavior and see whether something akin to reasoning can be found.

The evidence in favor of behavior and imagery patterns that are constituted of previously experienced relationships is very great. Studies on the association of ideas in man and studies of conditioning in animals and man offer this sort of evidence. On the basis of such studies the fundamental law of association has been formulated. It states that experiences which have been together in space or time become associated. On the other hand, it has recently been found that rats have the ability to solve problems without the use of contiguous past experiences.<sup>1</sup> The results of the study indicate that rats have the ability to combine *spontaneously the essentials of two isolated experiences* in such a manner as to reach a goal.

In a second study, two possible types of behavior patterns were postulated: <sup>2</sup> the one, made up of two or more contiguous experiences, designated as ability *L* (learning); the other, made up of the essentials of two isolated experiences, designated as ability *R* (reasoning). Tests

<sup>1</sup> Norman R. F. Maier, "Reasoning in White Rats," *Comparative Psychology Monographs* (Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1929), Vol. VI, No. 3, pp. 1-93.

<sup>2</sup> Maier, "The Effect of Cerebral Destruction on Reasoning and Learning in Rats," *Journal of Comparative Neurology*, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (1932), pp. 45-75.



were then devised to measure each of these abilities in case either one, or neither, or both, existed.

One test measured ability *R*; another measured ability *R* opposed by ability *L* (i.e., ability *L*, if functional, tended to produce an incorrect response, and ability *R*, if functional, a correct response); a third test measured ability *R* in conjunction with ability *L* (i.e., abilities *R* and *L* both tended to bring about the same response). Both normal rats and rats with partial destruction of the cerebral cortex were subjected to these tests.

The results showed conclusively that both postulated abilities *R* and *L* existed. Furthermore, ability *R* was markedly reduced in rats with cortical injuries, whereas ability *L* remained constant. The fact that abilities *R* and *L* were differently affected by brain lesions demonstrates that they are qualitatively different functions.

Ability *L* is therefore the ability to reproduce past experience. In order to perform with this ability, previous repetitions are necessary. This makes it a characteristic of learning.

Ability *R*, on the other hand, involves the combining of two experiences which have never before been experienced together. The relationships resulting from this ability are therefore new. In so far as this ability gives rise to new patterns of behavior (involving no previous repetition of certain relationships); and in so far as these new patterns are not the result of trial and error, and at the same time make for the experiencing of a desired goal, it resembles reasoning.

Having thus isolated a characteristic function and temporarily designated it as the characteristic principle of reasoning, we may now examine studies in human reason-



ing and see whether this same characteristic function is involved there. If this principle is found adequate to account for processes in man which are definitely examples of reasoning, our characteristic function will have been satisfactorily labeled.

Let us therefore examine the results of a study on human reasoning<sup>3</sup> in which a complex solution to a problem was broken into three parts. These parts may be designated as *A*, *B*, and *C*, and the solution as *ABC*. When experimental subjects are presented with the separate parts in the form of separate experiences, the solution should easily be found if past experiences alone are essential. But the solution should be difficult to find if the proper integration of the separate parts characterizes reasoning.

The results of this experiment showed that the subjects who had a knowledge of parts *A*, *B*, and *C*—and even those who knew that these parts, when properly integrated, formed the solution—had no advantage over those who had no knowledge of the parts at all. In point of fact, all subjects failed alike.

Thus it seems that mental trial and error, or even a knowledge of what experiences to use in solving a problem, were not sufficient to overcome the difficulty. The subjects failed because they could not combine the different experiences and thus see the relationships that were necessary for the solution.

If, now, the difficulty rests with the inability to integrate, something might be done to facilitate the integration. Consequently certain other subjects were given a

<sup>3</sup> Maier, "Reasoning in Humans: I, On Direction," *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, Vol. X, No. 2 (1930), pp. 115-143.



"direction," or a certain way of looking at the problem. This direction was not constituted of additional data, but was merely a means of changing the point of view of the subjects. As a result of the use of the direction, eight of the twenty-two subjects immediately solved the problem.

Thus we find that the important function in human reasoning is the integration of different experiences. Past experiences are of course necessary for the solution of problems, for in order to solve a problem one must have the necessary data at one's disposal, but the ability to reason is the ability to integrate disconnected experiences in such a manner as to overcome a difficulty.

Direction in thinking determines the manner in which the essentials of different experiences will be integrated. The direction assumed by the individual in his thinking is determined by what he sees the difficulty to be.

Now that we have some understanding of the function of direction, let us proceed to an examination of the following experiment. A group of subjects was asked to make a stick stand quite firmly in the center of a room, using only the available material, which consisted of two poles, a table clamp, and two blocks of wood. The solution of this problem consisted of clamping the two poles together end to end to make the combined pole fit snugly between the floor and the ceiling.

Two types of attempts at the solution were made. One was to fasten legs to the pole in many conceivable ways, but for this there was not enough material. The other was to place something (such as the blocks or a chair) under the pole so that it would touch the ceiling and so be held in place; but in this case the proper length could



not be obtained. Nine subjects attempted the first type of solution, and four, the second type.

After each subject had failed, he was given an additional experience: that of reaching for matches across the room. To do this, the subject had to clamp two poles together. The result of this experience or suggestion was that all of the subjects who made the second type of attempt solved the original problem immediately. Whereas all who made the first type of attempt failed: they returned to the problem and continued to try to fasten legs to the pole.

For the subjects falling under the second type, the suggestion was in harmony with their difficulty (i.e., how to use the ceiling as a support) and it was immediately used. It helped them to get the correct fit. For the subjects falling under the first type, the suggestion had no connection with their difficulty (how to arrange legs on a pole so as to make it stand). It did not serve as a substitute for legs.

The remarks made by subjects during the experiment also show how differently the problem was looked at by the subjects making different types of attempts at the solution. Those who saw no use for the suggestion considered it foolishness; they failed to see what it had to do with the problem. Those using the suggestion saw the solution suddenly; in some cases they did not even finish reaching for the matches.

Thus we see very clearly that the way a problem is looked at is an important factor in determining which experiences can be integrated. Other problems used give the same sort of evidence.

We have now arrived at a point in our discussion where



a more definite statement of what is meant by direction may be attempted. We have seen how important it is to look at a problem in a certain way, to see that the difficulty is of a certain kind. What the difficulty is seen to be will determine the way the problem is attacked. *This way of starting out on a problem is termed direction.*

For instance, let us say that two doctors are confronted with the problem of eliminating yellow fever. One of them looks at the problem in this manner: "Yellow fever is spread by a germ. This germ reaches man and infects him. If I can in some way make man immune to the germ, I shall succeed. Serums often make men immune to certain germs. I must therefore find the proper serum." Consequently this doctor sets out to discover an effective serum.

The other doctor sees the difficulty in this manner: "Yellow fever is spread by a germ. If I can keep the germs from reaching man, I shall succeed in eliminating the fever." He therefore starts out to discover how the germ is spread. He finds that mosquitoes spread the germ; he does away with them, and so solves the problem.

The way these doctors looked at the problem thus determined their direction or their way of attacking the problem. It might be pointed out that the first doctor's way of looking at the problem was largely determined by an habitual way of looking at such problems. He was influenced by the way similar problems had been solved and his way of looking at the problem was therefore less new and original. Very often such a carry-over from one problem to another is detrimental rather than useful. The chances are that if a solution can be found by starting out in an habitual direction, the solution already will



have been discovered. Great discoveries are therefore more likely to result when unusual or unexpected directions have been taken. In the above experiments, a characteristic of the problems was that their solutions depended on unusual directions. Because direction is so important in problem solving, suggestions which tend to cause the problem to be seen from a different point of view are more likely to bring about a solution than suggestions which are actually a part of the solution. Before the solution can result, the correct difficulty must be seen.

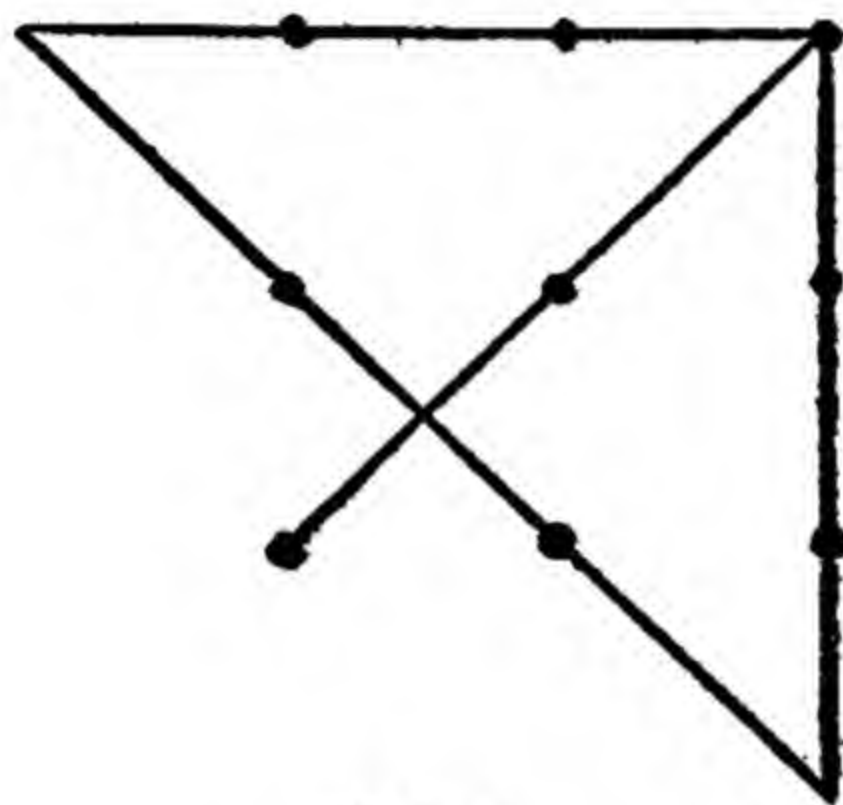


FIG. 2.

If the wrong difficulty is seen, then suggestions which are even a part of the solution will not be seen to have a connection with the problem.

A few illustrative problems are given in order to show how changing a direction rather than giving part of the solution as a suggestion aids in bringing about a solution.

1. Given a square of nine dots (three rows of three dots each), draw four straight lines so that each dot will be passed through at least once. The pencil is not to be taken from the paper and no lines are to be retraced. The solution is given in Figure 2.



This problem is quite difficult because a person continues his attempts within the area of the square. These attempts involve difficulties that cannot be overcome. If one suggests, "Why confine yourself to the area within the square?" a whole new field of possibilities presents itself. The old direction which hindered the solution has been removed, and the solution is soon forthcoming.

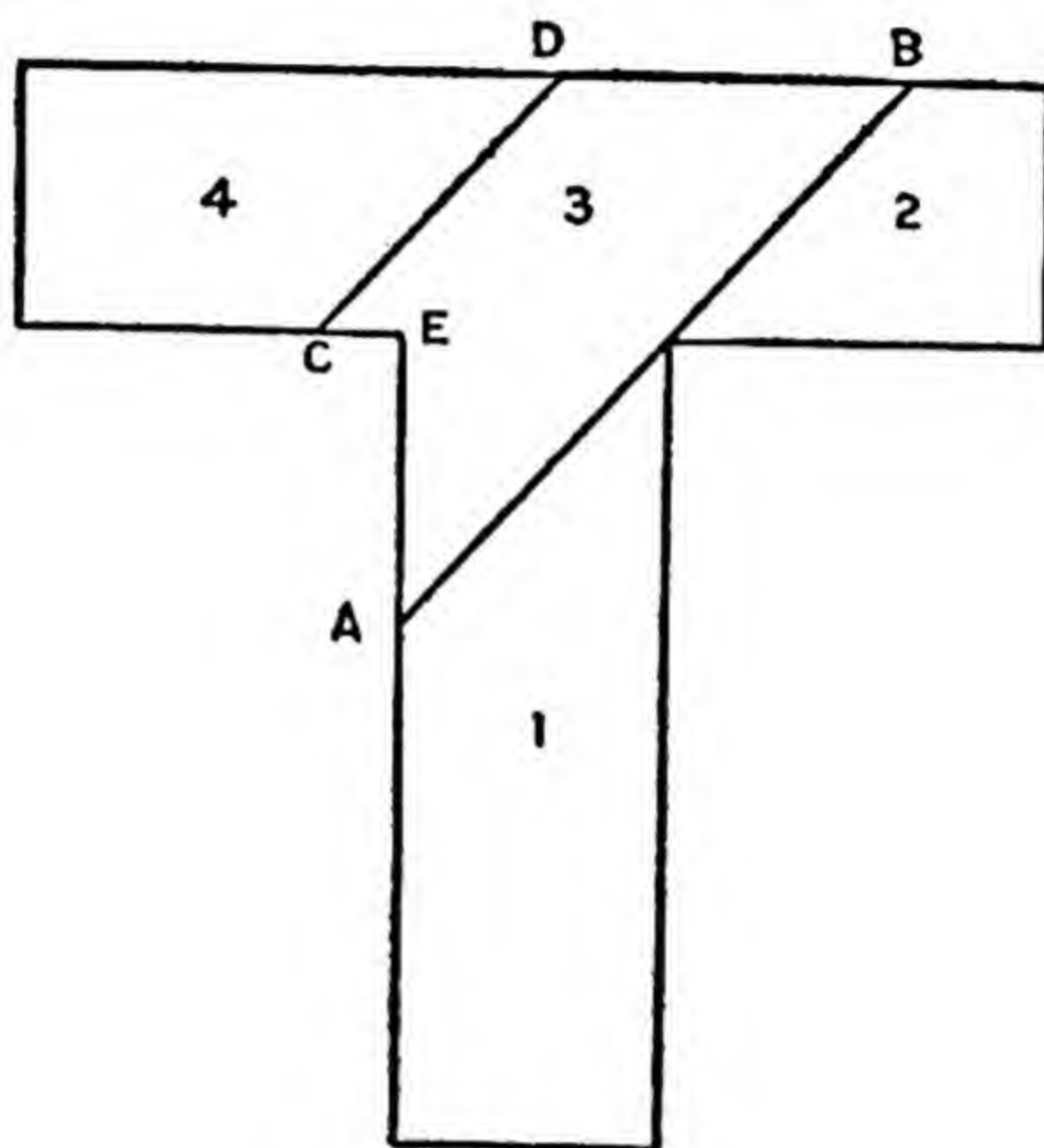


FIG. 3.

2. From six matches construct four equilateral triangles having a side equal in length to a match. This problem is difficult because one tries to construct them in one plane. If one asks, "Why limit yourself to two dimensions?" a new way of looking at the problem is seen and the solution is likely to follow.

3. If the T in Figure 3 be cut into four parts, along the lines indicated, and the task of putting the parts together be given to a subject, he will experience consid-

erable difficulty. The difficulty is that of seeing part 3 placed as it is. Side  $AB$ , being the longer side, seems to belong on the outside, whereas it should be placed on the inside. Furthermore, angle  $AEC$  is not seen as a right angle until the solution is found. Because of these difficulties, part 3 is placed either vertically or horizontally rather than halfway between these two positions. Trials and errors are made, but these attempts are made with part 3 in the vertical or horizontal position and consequently do not bring about the solution. When it is seen that part 3 can be placed differently, or that its side  $AB$  does not belong on the outside, the difficulty is seen differently and the subsequent attempts soon lead to the solution.

These problems thus offer difficulty because the successful direction is not the usual or habitual one. Getting away from the usual or habitual direction is not at all easy. The reasoner's efforts are always in line with the direction he is in. He is attempting to overcome a particular difficulty. Any suggestion that is given is therefore turned to harmonize with the direction he has assumed, if, indeed, it is not completely ignored.

From many observations made in the laboratory, a typical example is selected to illustrate how suggestions are turned and how irrelevant parts of suggestions are utilized to fit the direction the subject has assumed.

A problem had been given in which a candle was to be extinguished from a distance of about eight feet. The habitual thing to do, of course, was to blow at it. This the subject in question did, and after some time remarked that she could not blow hard enough. She then turned to tools. From the material on the table she selected



some short pieces of lead and rubber tubing. These she fastened together, alternating lead with rubber tubes until she had one tube about thirty inches long. She then blew at the candle through this series of tubes, but without success. If the series could have been made longer, the problem would have been solved, but a longer tube of such a flexible nature could not be supported with the hand. But the subject did not regard the lack of support as the difficulty. She still said that she could not blow hard enough, that she could not get enough air through the tubes.

A suggestion was then given. A long tube was made by joining lead and rubber tubes together alternately, and water was then siphoned through it. This might have suggested the use of a longer tube for blowing out the candle. But this is not what the subject saw in the suggestion. She filled her mouth with water and blew the water at the candle through her short series of tubes. The air she had previously blown had not been satisfactory, so substituting water for air was in line with her point of view. When this failed, she continued with the idea and threw the water directly with a glass. This had to be discontinued to prevent a flood.

Then a second suggestion was given. While sitting on a chair she was asked to hook a piece of cord on a nail in the ceiling with the use of a long pole. The pole served to span the distance between her and the ceiling, and might have suggested a support for the long series of tubes.

Again the suggestion failed. It gave her the idea of tying cord around the joints of the lead and rubber tubes to prevent leakage of air. This again was in harmony



with her difficulty of not getting enough air through the tubes.

A third suggestion, which was meant to be of no use, was then given. It consisted of merely offering her a cigarette. As usual, the suggestion was used in a manner that was harmonious with her point of view. She smoked the cigarette and blew smoke through the tubes at the candle.

Nor does one have to go to the laboratory for evidence of how things are turned in order to fit a point of view. People are constantly misunderstanding each other because most of them apply their own directions to the statements of others. What one person says is often given a twist or change in meaning so that it fits with the way others are seeing the situation. Different directions in thinking cause the same thing to be taken up in different ways and to become variously integrated so that the original meaning of the thing is entirely lost. Even teachers constantly misunderstand their students because the student does not profit by suggestions. A child is often regarded as inferior in intelligence when very often the difficulty is merely a matter of a wrong direction.

It is therefore essential for all communication that the importance of direction be recognized and dealt with effectively. A suggestion is likely to be an utter waste of time so long as it is given without regard to possible existing directions. Communications cannot successfully be carried on so long as wrong directions result in misunderstandings and no effort is made to guard against them.

Let us now turn to the problem of just what happens when a new solution is being discovered.



The Gestalt school of psychology describes the solution of a problem as the sudden formation of a *Gestalt*, i.e., a configuration or grouping. The act of reasoning accordingly depends upon a sudden reorganization of data. If, for instance, a list of words such as *table, bottle, cat, cabinet, glasses, alcohol, and men* is given to a group of people, it will be found that there is a decided tendency present to bring all of the words together into a single situation. There is a definite organization established, and the meaning of each word is a direct function of this organization. If some other words such as *ringstand, test tube* and *Bunsen burner* are added to the list, a feeling of disharmony is gradually experienced. The first additional word is accepted, and, as it does not fit with the group, it remains on the outside. When the next inharmonious word is added, there are two words that must remain outside the group. The words outside of the group are in opposition to those inside. There is disharmony between the outside and the inside, and thus a strain is established. The addition of the third word may make a disharmony so great that the first group can no longer maintain itself. A new grouping which included all of the words within the organization may then result.

Let us suppose that the grouping that resulted from the first part of the list was *barroom*. The second group of words would then have no place in such a grouping. But a regrouping of the words in the "barroom" situation with those not in harmony with it would result if the situation become a *laboratory scene*. Again, all the elements are in harmony with one another, but this new organization changes the meanings of all the ele-



ments in the first organization. Thus the tables change from drinking tables to laboratory tables, the liquor bottles to bottles of chemicals, the house cat to a laboratory specimen, etc.

The organization in which elements find themselves determines their meaning. Meaning is functional (a chair is something to sit in, a comb is something to comb the hair, a bus is something to ride in), and function depends upon organization. If a coin is used to buy something, it has one meaning and is of one organization; if it is used to turn a screw, it is quite a different thing and is of an altogether different organization.

In the light of this point of view, let us examine the following problem. A picture is to be hung, and there is a hammer available but no nails. There are screws but no screw driver. Driving a nail or a screw are both habitual solutions; they have been used before, so solving the problem by either method would require no reasoning. But because of the lack of material, the habitual solution cannot be used in this case. One is therefore presented with a new difficulty. Suddenly, let us say, a dime is used as a screw driver, and the problem is solved. What reorganization has taken place? The dime, which had previously been a piece of money, has suddenly become a screw driver. The functional value of the dime is no longer the same; its qualities no longer bear the same relationship.

Let us next take a problem that has been studied in the laboratory.<sup>4</sup> Two strings hang from the ceiling; the

<sup>4</sup> Maier, "Reasoning in Humans: II, The Solution of a Problem and Its Appearance in Consciousness," *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, Vol. XII, No. 2 (1931), pp. 181-194.



problem is to tie their ends together. The difficulty is that if one takes hold of either string the other one is so far away that it cannot be reached. How to get hold of both strings at the same time becomes the problem.

The habitual tendency is to use a pole in order to reach one cord while holding the other, and so overcome the difficulty of being unable to reach far enough. But if this type of solution is excluded, there is no way of overcoming the difficulty. A pair of pliers, which are given as a useful object in solving the problem, are of little aid in overcoming the difficulty. When the difficulty is seen to be, "How can the string be made to come to me?" a new grouping is possible. One cord may suddenly be seen as a pendulum, the pliers becoming the weight for the pendulum. Thus the solution is characterized by the formation of a new configuration or grouping. A string hanging from the ceiling is not the same as a pendulum cord, and a pair of pliers is not a weight.

The formation of the pendulum configuration may be facilitated by setting one of the strings in slight motion. This suggestion is very helpful, because a hanging string in motion is more nearly a pendulum.

When the slight motion of one of the cords brought about the solution, subjects were not conscious of the suggestion's effectiveness. The sudden experience of the solution masked any experience which produced it. When it was suggested that the motion of the cord had something to do with producing the solution, there were several types of comments. For example, some denied having seen the cord move, although the experimenter decidedly saw them stare fixedly at the cord, then turn quickly, fasten the weight to the cord, and put it in motion.



Others said that if the cord moved, they were unaware of the fact that they had seen a suggestion in the movement. Control experiments demonstrated beyond a doubt that unwillingness to admit that the suggestion was useful in no way accounted for the subject's comments.

The experimental facts indicate that previous to the finding of the solution the mind is in a state of confusion. The elements which eventually make up the organized solution are disorganized or are parts of different organizations. The meanings or functions of the elements, because they depend on the organization of which they are a part, are also very different from what they are after the solution is found. Thus the material that is to be used in the solution seems to the subject to be irrelevant to the task. Then suddenly the solution-organization is there and with it the resultant changes in meaning. It is like suddenly seeing the face in the puzzle picture. A new or different organization of elements replaces the former organizations. There is no conscious state between them. Thus the solution does not gradually develop from a nucleus, but appears as a complete unified organization.

When subjects were asked to describe their experience of finding a solution, all they could say was that it just came. Because groupings appear suddenly, the method of introspection is quite futile in the study of reasoning. All one can observe in oneself is what happened before and after the grouping. As trial and error is present before a grouping is found (due, in the first place, to the fact that there is confusion and, in confusion, random movements appear; and in the second place, due to the fact that habitual solutions are tried out), any description



of the whole proceeding is likely to be a description of the trial-and-error process. Hence it is not at all surprising that mental trial and error should be regarded as an explanation of reasoning. At best, trial and error might, on the basis of chance, set elements in the correct relationship. Yet this is not the solution. The grouping must be experienced by the individual. Seeing another prove a theorem in geometry is not understanding it. The grouping must take place in the nervous system. When everything on the outside is arranged to emphasize a certain grouping, then the experiencing of such a favored grouping is called *understanding* rather than reasoning. The experiencing of a grouping under such circumstances is less spontaneous, everything being in favor of the formation of a certain grouping.

Direction and configuration have been given a somewhat separate treatment in the foregoing discussion of reasoning. It is now important that they be integrated into a more complete view of reasoning.

Direction has been shown to be a very fundamental factor in determining whether or not a solution will be found. Configurations are formed when a solution is reached. Direction then seems to be the fundamental factor which determines the configuration. Whether one or another configuration will be formed seems to depend upon a certain direction which has been assumed. It seems, then, that direction which is a determining factor in the formation of patterns or configurations can be regarded as a process of facilitation and inhibition.<sup>5</sup> This

<sup>5</sup> For a physiological treatment of "direction," see Maier, "Reasoning and Learning," *Psychological Review*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 4 (1931), pp. 332-346.



supposition is not without experimental verification. Shepard and Fogelsonger,<sup>6</sup> in their study of association and inhibition found that in order to explain the facts of memory and inhibition, it was necessary to assume a pattern notion of association. It is with this study in mind that it is here stated that patterns may be either facilitated or inhibited.

Direction seems to be this facilitating and inhibiting factor in the case of the higher mental processes. The right direction facilitates the formation of certain elements into the correct pattern; a wrong direction facilitates a pattern which cannot become the solution and therefore remains incomplete. Facilitating a certain pattern necessarily involves the inhibition of others, and therefore, when one pattern tends to be established, all elements which do not go to make up this pattern are inhibited, kept out, not seen to have any connection with the problem.<sup>7</sup>

Let us return to the problem of hanging a picture (page 37). If hanging the picture is regarded as a matter of finding something that can be driven into the wall with the hammer, then a configuration cannot result because the elements necessary for the formation of such a configuration are not present. The tendency for the formation of such a configuration, however, would prevent the use of the coin to solve the problem. A coin cannot

<sup>6</sup> J. F. Shepard and H. M. Fogelsonger, "Studies in Association and Inhibition," *Psychological Review*, Vol. XX, No. 4 (1913), pp. 290-311.

<sup>7</sup> In a recent unpublished study, Maier has found that a group of college students who have been taught to avoid habitual directions solve from 20 to 40 per cent more problems than a control group of students without such training. The results show that habitual directions prevent new ones from appearing. Hence new ideas may fail to appear because they are blocked by old ones.



become part of a solution that consists of hanging a picture on something that can be driven into the wall by a hammer.

If, on the other hand, the subject thinks of the picture as hanging from a screw in the wall, then the coin, instead of being pushed aside as irrelevant, will be encouraged to enter the solution-configuration. As a coin, it still has no place in the solution, but because of the facilitating or encouraging effect of the right direction it may suddenly become a screw driver. The qualities of thinness and rigidity, which in no way characterized its meaning as a coin, would then become its characteristics and would determine its function. Facilitation thus causes the dominance of the meaning which fits in with the attempted solution.

In every problem there is a gap. When the configuration is formed, the gap is filled in. What will satisfactorily fill the gap depends upon the nature of the objective situation. Those things which will be used in an attempt to fill in the gap depend upon the grouping that is being facilitated. The correct grouping harmonizes with the objective situation; a wrong grouping conflicts with it. Having the tendency to form the correct grouping is not, however, to have the solution. The gap has not yet been filled in. But when the tendency is correct, elements which will satisfactorily fill in the gap are facilitated rather than inhibited.

Habitual meanings often prevent certain elements from becoming parts of a new grouping. The old meanings must be broken down before certain elements can become part of a new grouping and thus have new meanings. Only a facilitation for the new grouping can successfully



break down the old meanings. Thus the coin, which has the habitual meaning of being money, must have the screw-driver grouping facilitated so that it will cease being money and become a screw driver.

An element can thus tend to become part of a grouping at one time and resist the grouping at another time, merely because at one time the direction is such as to facilitate the grouping, while at a different time the direction may be such as to inhibit that particular grouping.

Stressing certain qualities of certain elements, such as the thinness of a dime, makes such characteristics stand out and makes them more likely to become part of the configuration with which the stressed quality is in harmony. When the direction is wrong, such stressing may even cause a change in direction to result. The advantage of changing direction in order to bring about solutions has already been demonstrated in the preceding pages.

Trial and error now begin to play a somewhat different rôle. It does not consist of trying out elements as much as it does of trying out directions. (The trying out of different past experiences results when the direction is wrong.) When the direction is right, the correct relationships are facilitated. Organisms when blocked readily resort to random activity. This random activity is, however, very limited, being confined to attempts to overcome certain difficulties. The tendency to try out different directions is very rare even in man. He has difficulty in breaking away from the usual way of doing things. It is the resourceful man who can pursue many different directions, and easily leave them and start anew.

When one tries to solve a problem, one always tries to



solve it in a certain way, and so long as one direction is present others are impossible. It is therefore necessary that the productive thinker be able to free himself of unsuccessful directions. Because they persist, great discoveries are often made when no attempt is being made to find them. During periods of relaxation, attempts at solutions are not being made and no directions are present. The facts, however, persist in memory. With no persistent direction interfering, a new one is more likely to appear. The facts may become organized without conscious effort, and a difficult solution found. The history of science is profuse with discoveries that have appeared in this manner. Wallas<sup>8</sup> greatly stresses the value of such relaxation and calls it incubation.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1926).

## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT WE DO WHEN WE WRITE

CHAPTER III has exposed the nature of the processes underlying the formation of configurations. The purpose of the present chapter is to demonstrate in what way the writer must effectively arrange his language patterns to encourage the reader to experience the writer's configuration.

Although this book is interested in all forms of prose writing, the product of the creative artist is its primary concern. As Chapter II has pointed out, not all writing is necessarily artistic. The artist is evaluating as he writes: he is emphasizing and stressing *some* elements of experience, and slighting others. Hawthorne, in *The Scarlet Letter*, is not attempting to picture the entire life of an early New England town. Many elements he has slighted or omitted altogether. But he is stressing a few phases of the town's life, and some he is bringing out boldly. After having read the novel, one knows little of the town's commercial and economic life, but one knows much of its moral and religious life and attitude; for Hawthorne has stressed the latter and slighted the former.

It is with the proper manipulation of language patterns that the writer is enabled to stress and subdue his elements in order to communicate his exact meaning.

Language is merely a system of symbol-relationships which must serve as stimuli to produce a response in the



reader approximating the writer's response to the original situation. The writer's configuration comes from a response to a situation; the reader's configuration comes from a response to language. And these configurations must be nearly identical if the writing is to be successful.

Language, then, shoulders a tremendous responsibility. Let us see how a knowledge of certain mental processes can help the writer and the critic.

Sensations coming from the sense organs become organized, and consequently we experience groupings. Some groupings are strong and therefore stand out from

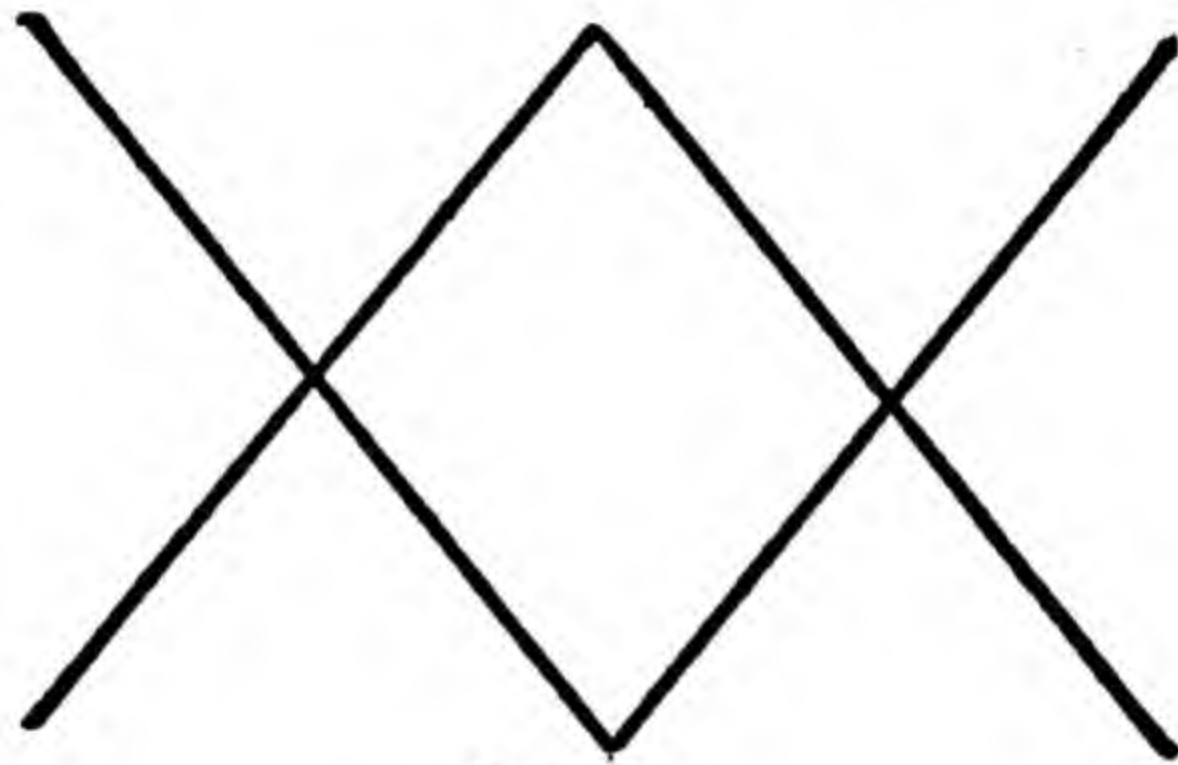


FIG. 4.

others: objects are examples of such groupings. Other groupings, having less stability, permit us to see first one thing and then another.

In Figure 4, because the grouping has little stability, due to no particular stresses, we may see many groupings or objects at different times; i.e., we may see two X's, or one upright and one inverted V, or a W placed on an M, etc.

In Figure 5 we may experience two groupings: one in which the hole opens out, the other in which it opens in. Each of these groupings can be seen with about equal

ease, and consequently the two groupings alternate. Sometimes certain groupings are subdued because of the presence of stronger groupings. These weaker, subdued groupings often may be seen with effort, and sometimes they cannot be seen or experienced at all.

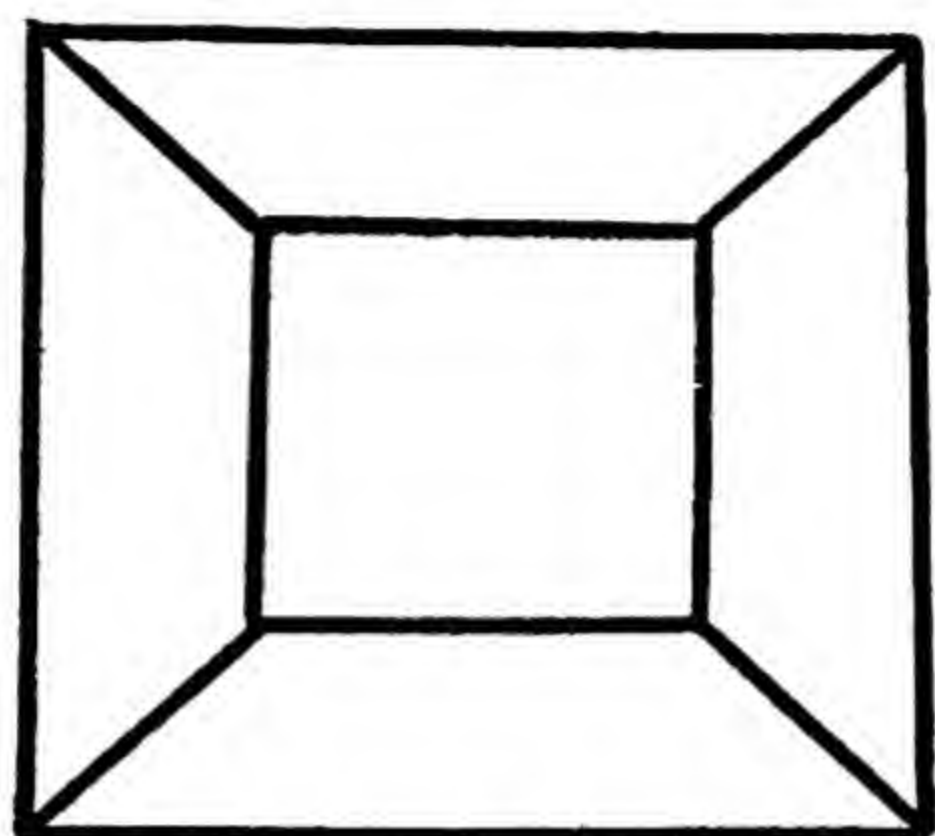


FIG. 5.

Figure 6 (page 48) shows how element *A* is completely subdued in the upper half of the complex pattern *B*. In the lower half of *B*, element *A* can be easily seen. The heavy lines accentuate the elements that form pattern *A* and consequently interfere with the organization that we experience in the upper half of pattern *B*.

A photograph may produce in the observer approximately the same grouping, or interpretation, as the original stimulus-situation. A painting, however, being more than a photograph, favors certain groupings. The artist's interpretation differs greatly from those generally experienced. His configuration is *subdued* for most observers, but for him it is largely facilitated by the direction his mind has assumed. If he wishes to convey this grouping to others (who experience the usual or ordinary groupings), he must either weaken the tendencies of their



groupings or strengthen the tendencies for the formation of his own. We recall, for example, the street corner in the Chinese district of a large city at dusk (Chapter II). There is an urchin looking into his environment. Let us say the urchin is crossing the street. The artist sees him,

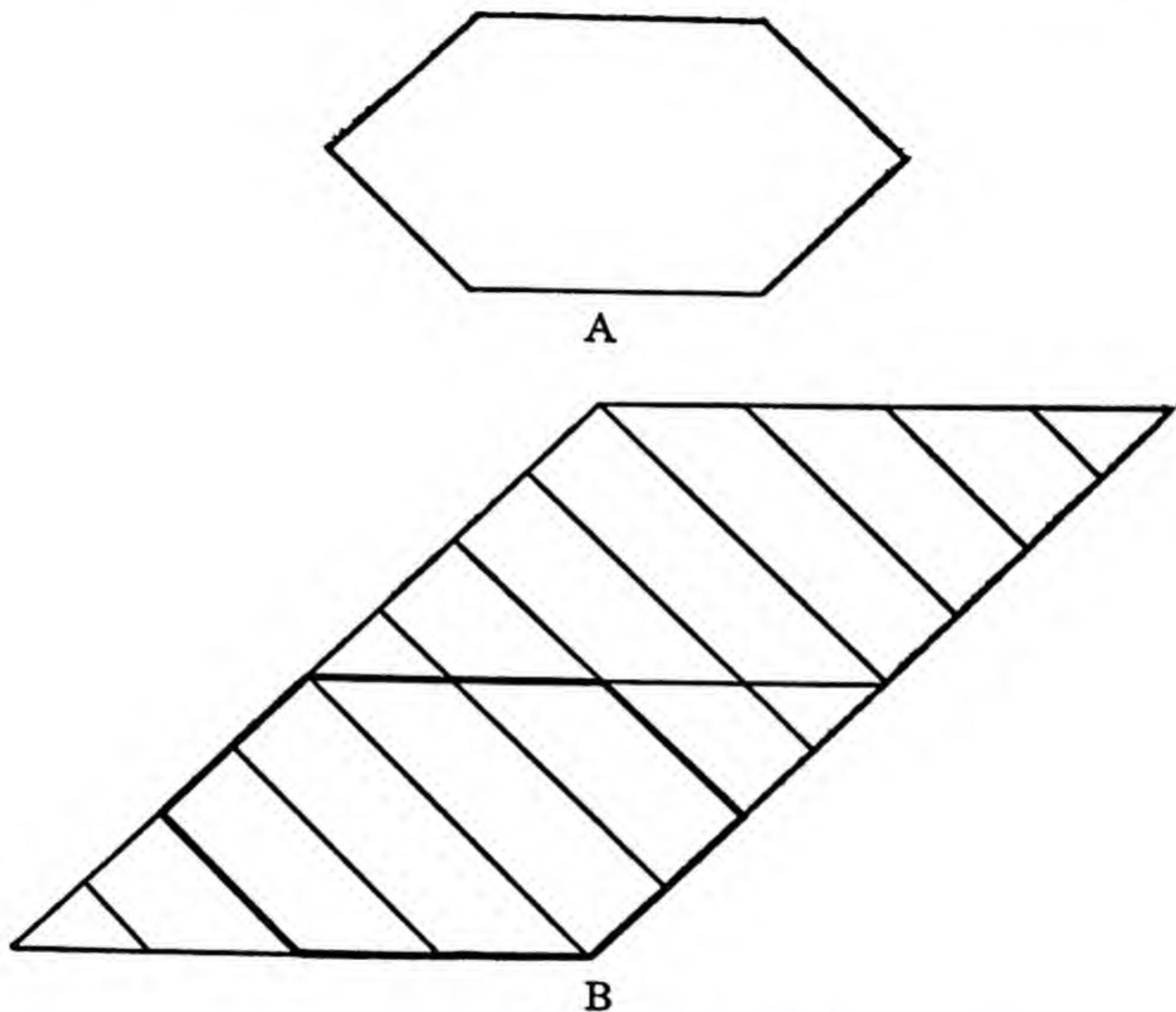


FIG. 6.

Taken from Gottschaldt, "Psychologische Forschung" (1926), VIII, 296.

lonely and forsaken by a world too busy worshiping prosperity to understand a mere street child. What would a camera reproduce? Probably the street corner with its small groups in conversation, the street lamp, the unkept buildings, and the comparative poverty of the

neighborhood. But the artist paints a picture much unlike the camera reproduction. His primary interest may be in the boy, and he may therefore seek to emphasize and stress his significance. Certain elements in the picture must be stressed and other elements must be slighted to enable the artist to produce a grouping which will emphasize the boy's significance *despite the other groupings which other observers of the street corner may have*. The artist may place the boy very near the center of the picture, balancing the remainder of the picture to make him stand out. Now it must be remembered that only through stresses and slights can the artist communicate his own grouping: everything in the picture must be arranged to that end. The boy becomes the figure. He wears clothes with no press and little design, having odd patches that suggest his poverty. His hatless head has been for some time without the effects of barber or comb. He appears lost, unsettled, and unwanted. Although it is dusk, the street lamp plays upon his features, serving to emphasize the characteristics the artist wishes to stress. In the ground of the picture there are dull buildings, and groups of people in animated conversation. All objects in the ground are nicely balanced, but not monotonously distributed. No one of the groups, or of those rushing by, is interested in the boy. Those rushing past are especially contrasted with his lack of aim and purpose: to these people life seems to have a meaning; to him life is barren and charmless—and no one seems to realize his emptiness. The artist produces a picture of contrasts: the boy and the dull buildings against the cheerful groups of people and the patches of colorful sky. In short, the artist's picture differs from the



camera's picture because he has encouraged a definite interpretation of the street corner by stressing certain elements and slighting others. He presents a definite organization which produces a more powerful grouping than the street-corner configurations that persons may have previously experienced.

If the artist wishes individuals with their ordinary, habitual interpretations to see *his* interpretation, he must stress and slight certain elements. People who view his picture must see his interpretation despite the habitual

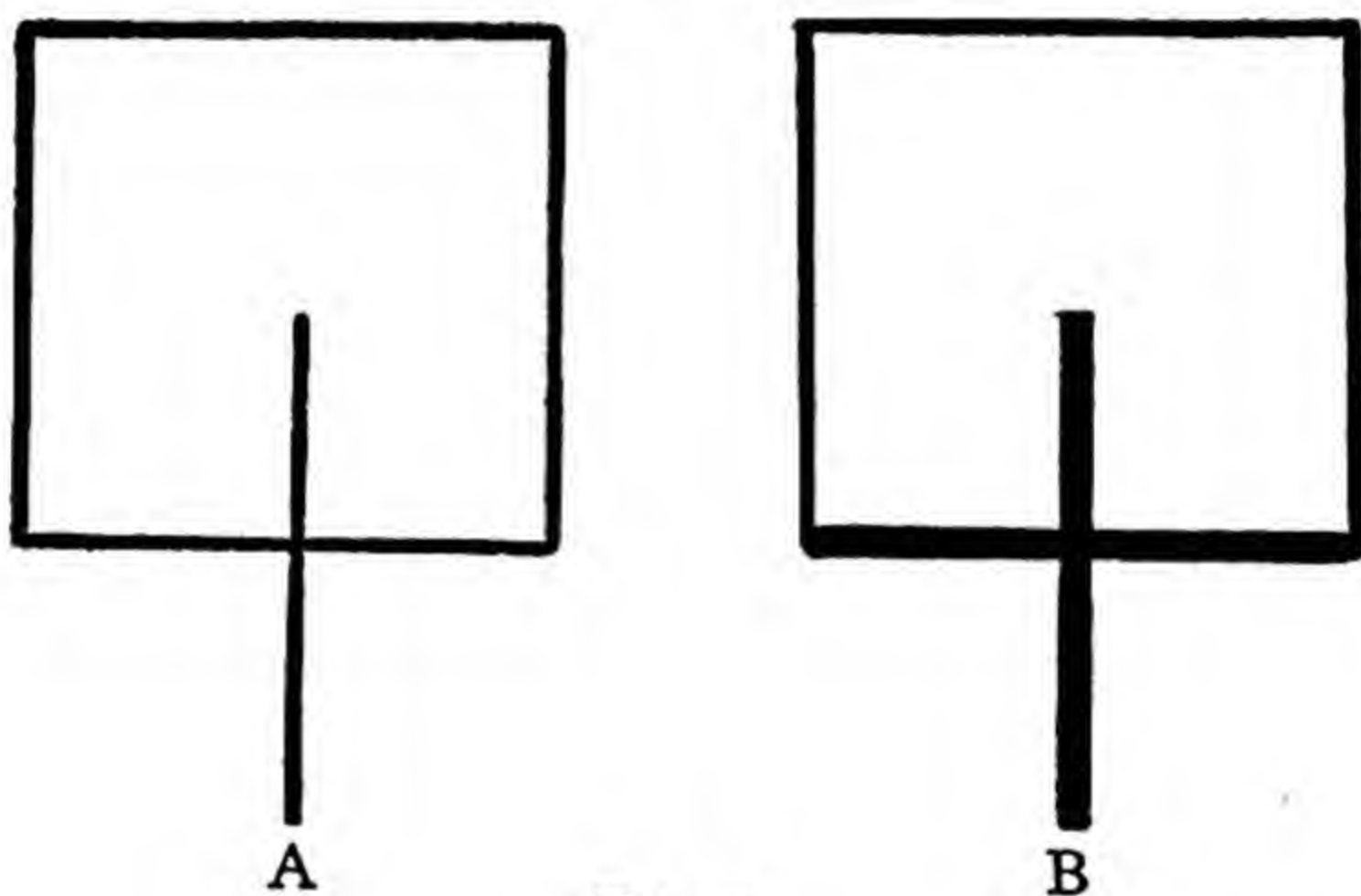


FIG. 7.

configurations they bring to the picture. For example, if we wish to cause observers to see a plus sign in a certain mass of stimuli, we must reproduce the stimuli as in *B* of Figure 7 rather than in *A* of that illustration. In the first drawing, *A*, the plus sign is there, but it is not easily seen because the organization making for the back of a road sign is stronger than the one making for the plus sign. In the second drawing, *B*, the stressing of the lines which make up the plus sign, and the slighting of others which now become ground (and which were



previously figure), cause the plus sign to stand out; it would be unusual to miss it.

Although the example of the plus sign seems to embody only a simple principle, it is really a basic law of painting. An outstanding work of art is the result of an unusual interpretation of some situation. The only way in which the artist's interpretation can be communicated to others is through a medium; and the only way in which a medium can convey the artist's interpretation is by evaluating the elements in the medium. His ability to evaluate is the painter's tremendous advantage over the photographer. Camera reproductions can break down very little habitual resistance, a great quantity of which every observer brings to pictures.<sup>1</sup> Now how can this apparently unrelated explanation be applied to literature?

In writing, the stimuli are placed temporally instead of spacially. The writer, unlike the painter, must present his stimuli serially instead of *en masse*: in this respect, writing is more complex than painting. The mode of presenting a series of stimuli in writing is of tremendous importance, especially if the grouping desired by the writer is unusual and quite different from the habitual grouping. To indicate how carefully a writer must arrange his word patterns in order to communicate his precise meaning, let us examine the following statement:

Time flies you cannot they go too swiftly

This statement is meaningless because the reader does not properly group the word patterns. In order to bring

<sup>1</sup> The photographer may, of course, select a central point, balancing his picture carefully. In such case, some interpretation and evaluation enter into photography—and such photography approaches art.



out the desired grouping, something must be added which will encourage it to appear. Habitual ways of reading often lead us astray unless punctuation marks are added. Hence, punctuation added to the above statement,

Time flies? you cannot; they go too swiftly.

produces a unified organization. When this organization is grasped, the meanings of the elements have changed. *Time* has become a verb instead of a noun, and *flies* has become a noun instead of a verb.

Note the two interpretations that can be made of the following statement:

A jovial, hilarious crowd appeared to offer congratulations.

Here two different meanings are possible, each depending on the way the elements are grouped by the reader. The meaning of *appeared* depends on how the word patterns are grouped. In one grouping, *appeared* means *came*; in the other it means *seemed*. In this example, both groupings are meaningful and are of about equal strength. Neither meaning depends on punctuation. The meaning that the reader will find—that is, the grouping he will make—depends on the direction he will have assumed. To insure that the reader catches the desired meaning, previous sentences are necessary to produce a direction which will cause him to form the grouping the writer wishes to communicate.

In Figure 6 (page 48), element *A* is not seen as part of pattern *B*. It is so imbedded in the larger pattern that the lines which constitute element *A* are parts of different and stronger organizations. Let us examine the following parallel example of this situation in writing:



As two rather unsympathetic men were making their way down a lonely road, they came upon a man lying prostrate in their path. *Seeing that he had been beaten and robbed, they crossed to the far side and continued their journey.* Apparently, the experience had left them untouched; for they soon resumed their former conversation, having completely forgotten the unfortunate man.

When the italicized sentence is thus imbedded, it cannot mean that the men ignored the unfortunate man because there was no opportunity of robbing him again. Yet such a meaning can be extracted if the sentence is removed from its context, the same as element *A* in Figure 6 can be easily experienced if it is removed from *B*. Furthermore, this second meaning of the italicized sentence can be rendered dominant by imbedding it as follows:

As two rather vicious highwaymen sought possible victims along a lonely road, they came upon a man lying prostrate in their path. *Seeing that he had been beaten and robbed, they crossed to the far side and continued their journey.* There was no profit for them in a man of such circumstances.

There are also difficulties in presenting the reader with total groupings which are not dependent on the way they are imbedded. A reader's attitude toward life or a certain phase of it may cause him to distort a writer's meanings, even though no particular sentence may have been misunderstood.

To indicate how a reader's attitude may alter a writer's interpretation, the following example is given.

Recently one of the authors of this book discovered that a friend of his, a young practicing physician, had completely misinterpreted Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*.



In this novel, Lewis is portraying the character of Martin Arrowsmith, a young physician who has a flair and a desire for laboratory work which quite submerged any liking for "curing belly-aches," as Lewis puts it. Martin's respect for the average practicing M.D. is not at all excessive: he mocks his guesswork and his apparent lack of interest in preventive medicine. Consequently, harboring such opinions, Arrowsmith, during his brief years of practicing before he enters the laboratory, is not a glowing success as a family doctor. Briefly, he is a scientist and not a general practitioner. As Lewis interprets him, he is the superior of most physicians. Now the young physician who had completely misinterpreted Lewis's novel declared Arrowsmith a failure and a drifter because he had partially failed as a family physician. The point to be made here is that our friend had taken into that novel configurations strong enough to prevent Lewis from eliminating them with stronger ones. The blame, however, can hardly be placed on Lewis; if any one is expected to misinterpret *Arrowsmith*, the young physician is that man: a strong prejudice precludes an appreciation of satire.

The above account of such misinterpretation points to the very practical necessity of arranging language so dexterously that open-minded readers will catch configurations that are strong enough to break down any similar ones they may possess.<sup>2</sup> A change in a word, like a change in color in painting, may weaken or strengthen the desired grouping, although the very elements which constitute that grouping may, if organization is disre-

<sup>2</sup> The presentation of the configuration must not be overdone, of course; the writer must leave something for the reader to do.



garded, be left unchanged. *The inclusion of necessary elements is not enough: only through organization can the desired interpretation be effected.* Writing, because its medium cannot be presented spacially complete, has an advantage over painting. Because the stimuli (language) fall over a period of time, they can better establish a direction—and direction we have previously seen to be of immense importance in determining groupings. The author of a novel has many pages in which to furnish directions which will enable the reader to see the author's groupings. Mr. H. G. Lieber, a New York painter, being aware of the advantage of temporal stimuli, suggests that paintings be experienced serially. He would have color motion pictures taken while the painting is in progress; in this way, art lovers could see a picture grow and thus not be limited to experiencing a mere cross-section—or the finished product. Mr. Lieber believes that one cannot fully appreciate a painting unless one has seen the painting evolve. He thus recognizes the importance of establishing directions to enable one to experience easily the final cross-section.<sup>3</sup>

One of the finest examples of the use of direction in literature can be found in Antony's speech over the body of Cæsar, in Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*. It will be remembered that Brutus murdered Cæsar not because "I loved Cæsar less, but that I loved Rome more." Brutus's speech in defense of his action is effective enough to cause citizens to remark, just before Antony speaks in Cæsar's defense, that "'Twere best he [Antony] speak no harm of Brutus here. . . . This Cæsar was a tyrant."

Antony rises to face a difficult situation: Brutus has

<sup>3</sup> From a conversation with Norman R. F. Maier.



convinced the citizenry that he has stabbed Cæsar for his unwarranted ambitiousness. The mob expects Antony to be prejudiced against Brutus because of his (Antony's) great love of Cæsar. The mob favors Brutus, deprecates Antony, and condemns Cæsar. With a cleverness perhaps unparalleled in literature, Shakespeare's Antony entirely reverses the situation. He comes "to bury Cæsar, not to praise him"; he admits the perniciousness of unwarranted ambition; and flatters the "noble Brutus" as "an honorable man."

Having agreed with the mob, he is given ear. Antony then proceeds to extol the virtues of Cæsar (as is usual and correct at a funeral) through a recital of his useful public acts: these acts the mob cannot deny, and need not, for it is Cæsar's past that they admittedly once loved. Gradually he brings Cæsar's acts up to date, and faithfulness is found to be his only offense.

Paralleling the exposition of Cæsar's faithfulness to the state, Antony insists repeatedly that "Brutus is an honorable man." When Antony first uses this phrase, he seems to apply it in all sincerity to the character of Brutus: the crowd interprets it as a sympathetic gesture toward Brutus. But with each successive use of the phrase, Antony furnishes his listeners with a slightly different direction which causes them to make a slightly different interpretation of the phrase. From a tone of sincerity, Antony changes to one of excuse for the act of Brutus. Then comes a touch of doubt, then a tone of obvious irony, and finally the phrase, "Brutus is an honorable man," communicates a bitter hatred, an interpretation which impels the crowd to turn upon Brutus as an unscrupulous murderer of their idol. The entire speech is



an excellent example of the necessity and power of using proper directions. Antony begins by paralleling the mob in his thinking, but as he applies one direction after another, imperceptibly, gradually, more and more he turns the direction of thinking, always so gradually as to be unnoticed, until finally he has reversed the original direction of the mob's thinking. The same words that originally flattered Brutus in the eyes of the mob become bitter reproach and a cry for the blood of Brutus.

Perhaps the most important aid to the writer is this factor of direction. It is one thing to achieve insight into a situation, but it is quite another thing to cause readers to achieve the same insight! That is, it is entirely possible to solve problems without knowing how one has done it, but one cannot communicate the solution to another mind without knowing what difficulties the other mind may encounter.

We have discovered that the way a problem is looked at is extremely important in problem solving. A direction may either facilitate or inhibit the solution. The writer must therefore furnish the reader with a facilitating direction and see that all inhibiting influences are broken down. The principal factor in the detective story is the giving of wrong directions; readers are led to believe that the solution to the mystery lies in one direction, while the end of the story suddenly solves the mystery by switching from the wrong direction to the right one. The story baffles us because we cannot shake ourselves loose from the directions by which the writer misleads us. The habitual way of seeing a problem gives rise to successful directions in ordinary life. In creative work, where many others have worked on the same problem, it is almost



safe to assume that the habitual directions will lead to nothing new.

Men have always recognized that great thinkers have flexible minds: originality is the result of flexibility, of being able to approach problems in new ways. Great writers are able to rid themselves of old directions, while mediocre authors cling to old and habitual ones. Using these old directions, writers achieve only second-hand interpretations, while the great writer, using an unusual direction, may achieve an original interpretation. Now a writer cannot achieve insight for the reader: the reader must do that for himself. Insight is the experience of the sudden formation of a grouping, the elements of which come from parts of different unified past experiences. Because groupings depend on the nervous system, one person cannot achieve insight for another. But a writer can furnish the reader with everything except the actual insight. He can furnish the reader with facts, with proper directions, with adequate emphasis on important elements, and thus bring the reader to the threshold of a new grouping. If these things are done adequately, the literary critic must admit the efficacy of the writer's communicative skill. The writer has done all that is possible to cause the reader's configuration to approximate his own.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is now even more clear why so much depends upon exact language patterns: a false word may produce a false direction, which in turn will weaken the entire configuration. Perhaps poetry is affected most

<sup>4</sup> This statement implies, of course, that the writer is writing for a certain public: when Einstein wrote his theory of relativity, he furnished directions for fellow scientists who have his background; he attempted no communication with laymen.

directly by the use of a single false word, or by the inclusion of an exact word or phrase. When we realize that language is a substitute stimulus for actual situations, we recognize how finely it must be adjusted to achieve its end—a configuration in the mind of the reader which approximates that in the mind of the writer.



## CHAPTER V

### CREATIVENESS IN SCIENCE AND ART

THE arts are often described as being highly imaginative, while science is regarded by many as depending little on the imaginative faculty; indeed, as even being antagonistic and scornful toward it. Such a distinction between art and science seems unduly temerarious. The inventor must be capable of imagining his model, and the theoretical thinker in science must leave the realm of ordinary experience to consider all remote possibilities and combinations. The artist's world need not extend beyond experience, and is therefore often less highly imaginative than the world of the scientist.

We find that some writers are criticized for being too imaginative, and others for being not imaginative enough. Literary men boast because they claim to have imagination, and scientists because they do not. But of what they mean by imagination we are not always certain. To deal in things other than facts can hardly be what is meant by imagination, because that characterizes the insane mind too well. Yet certain pictures of unreality are desired. Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and G. Lowes Dickinson's *Magic Flute* are called highly imaginative—and, paradoxically enough, are the works of a mathematician and a philosopher, respectively.

Psychologists, when dealing with imagination, discuss imagery. They say that the artist must have a high



degree of imagery, or the ability to re-present, in the mind's eye, certain combinations of past experience. The painter, then, must have uncommon visual imagery, the musician auditory imagery, and the poet a combination of visual, auditory, and verbal imagery. The overemphasis on imagery makes any explanation of the creative process difficult; for mere imagery can never produce art or solve a problem, although it may aid greatly. Of greater importance is the *kind of combination* experienced by the artist. In dreams and in reverie there is much imagery, but the organization of the images is largely a matter of past experience and the impressions that certain experiences have had upon us. In such cases, original and valuable combinations of images are rare and a matter of chance. If this were not the case, children with eidetic imagery,<sup>1</sup> insane people, and people under the influence of drugs would be highly productive in science and the arts. Creativeness in art is more than imagery. As in reasoning, it implies that something new has been produced. Past experiences must not merely be recalled and combined; they must also be integrated. It is this matter of integration which characterizes all creativeness. Imagination is not of a creative nature unless it involves a reorganization of experience. As imagination is as necessary to science as to art, we cannot distinguish between creativeness in science and art on the basis of imagery. Rather the distinction lies in the nature of the experiences that are organized. In other

<sup>1</sup> Eidetic imagery is a form of imagery in which the individual is able to reconstruct an experience in the mind's eye which is very nearly a duplicate of the original. Thus a brief exposure of a picture can be almost perfectly reconstructed and details observed which were unnoticed during the exposure. Children frequently have this form of imagery.



words, the data or the elements of an integration, rather than the type of process involved, are different in science from those in art. These two kinds of data, which mark the distinction between scientific and artistic interpretations of experience, we shall term *objective* and *subjective* data, the explanation and physiological basis of which immediately follow.

The primary data of all our experience are our sensations. A sensation is the experience which accompanies stimulation of the sense organs. Ordinarily the individual is aware only of those sense organs which receive stimulation from the environment. Thus vision, audition, taste, olfaction, and touch (pressure, pain, temperature) are called our five senses. When we receive such sensations, they are experienced as having a definite localization: we experience the sensory quality not as a quality of our sense organs, but rather as a quality of the stimulating object. Such sensory qualities are experienced as coming from the outside and are therefore called *objective* data. Color sensations, or sensations making for the perception of space, are thus examples of objective data.

The sensations resulting from our five senses, however, constitute only a small part of our experience. During emotional states, as well as during the affective states of pleasantness and unpleasantness, there are decided changes in the viscera which are richly supplied with sense organs. Changes in the heart rate, the circulation, the breathing, in the digestive tract, the glands, the constitution of the blood, etc., give rise to an unlocalized mass of sensory data which greatly color the experience of the stimulus that causes their arousal. The sensations aris-



ing from such sources may be called *subjective* data, being richest when we have affective and emotional experiences. They are called subjective because they are indirectly aroused and depend to a greater extent on the individual than do objective data. Objective sensations are very common to the race; and we find that individuals agree as to the nature of the sensations of any particular objective experience. But the sensations accompanying an affective or emotional experience vary greatly among individuals, and even the same stimulus will not always produce the same experience in the same individual. Nor do facial expressions (for example, those which accompany an emotional state and have nothing to do with the objective description, say, of a grizzly bear) show any uniformity in the same individual at different times, or in different individuals at the same time. Furthermore, the emotional and affective experiences are less definite and localized. Thus subjective data differ from objective data in that the first represent a greater contribution of the individual and depend on the particular individual and the particular time. Objective data can easily be verified and measured, while subjective data are indefinite and variable.

The data used in creative thinking in science are primarily objective. Darwin had the facts from his study of plants and animals well at hand, but they were unorganized and therefore without meaning because he had no theory to account for the facts. While reading Malthus's essay on population, Darwin suddenly formulated the theory which integrated all his facts into a single system. Malthus claimed that because life increased in geometrical progression and the production of food-



stuffs increased in arithmetic progression, the destruction of the race was inevitable. That is to say, when the rate of consumption became greater than the rate of production, the shortage would result in racial starvation. Darwin, however, having more facts at his disposal than Malthus, saw that only the unfit would not survive. He arrived therefore at his doctrine of natural selection and consequently his evolutionary hypothesis. The suggestion of Malthus gave Darwin the proper direction which integrated his great mass of unorganized data and gave to them new and revolutionary meanings.<sup>2</sup>

The data used in the creative arts are largely subjective. Experiences of pleasantness and unpleasantness therefore play an important rôle in artistic productions. The various emotions aroused in the subject (the experiencing individual) become part of the data. A thing is beautiful or ugly not in its own right, but because of the subjective reaction to it. We do not say that a chair is comfortable in its own right: we find it comfortable and thus describe how we feel about it. When we like a picture and describe our liking, we are not describing the picture, but rather our reaction to it. The painter is trying to arouse a reaction in the subject; he is not presenting merely a number of objective relations. Interpretations, when they depend upon a subjective reaction to an object, are largely made up of subjective data. Values depend upon personal reactions to an object, and therefore evaluation and interpretation play an important

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, who reached the same conclusion as Darwin, but quite independently of him, had in his possession facts very similar to Darwin's. He, too, after reading Malthus, suddenly got the idea of natural selection. Malthus's essay thus served as a good direction for one who had the necessary data at hand for the configuration.



part in the creative arts. Thus an artistic interpretation is a configuration made up largely of subjective data. Raphael's painting of the Virgin Mary presents a new interpretation of his subject, crystallizing certain characteristics of Mary that many people recognize as belonging to a woman of her religious importance but which previously had not been forcefully exhibited.

To illustrate the nature of creativeness in art, let us speculate on how Thomas Gray may have come to write the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." We can visualize him in a country churchyard observing the gravestones of many who have gone. His environment turns his mind to the subject of death, its mysteries, and especially his own relationship with death and life. Most of us have experienced such a reaction to a graveyard: we find ourselves examining our lives very carefully. We think of our failures, our successes, and the chance factors that have turned things in our favor; and how many events, had they materialized differently, would have changed our whole life. Let us suppose that Thomas Gray had these same thoughts. He may also have perceived the unpretentiousness of the graves and the simplicity which had permeated the lives of those noted on the gravestones.

If now we suppose that these separate thoughts became integrated, we have the central thought of the poem; that is, if unfortunate events had turned out differently, many of these now unknown would have been immortal:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
 Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;  
 Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,  
 Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.



The original, or creative, phase of Gray's poem is not constituted of new elements: churchyards are common. Gray simply saw a new grouping, a different churchyard. An ordinary experience in a churchyard suddenly combined with certain experiences and views of life common to us all, and consequently formed an entirely new experience. His new experience, effectively communicated, is a work of art because it is a desirable interpretation.

We often hear of artists who seek inspiration. They experiment in many ways, and finally, when they least expect it, come upon something valuable. Suddenly coming upon a new interpretation causes them to work with unusual intensity. To the poet, whole lines appear; to the musician, a whole melody rings in his ears. Because we think in symbols, the integration is thus often experienced as an integration of the symbols to which we have been conditioned. Thus the poets and the musicians find their word patterns and their melodies often ready-made.

Henry James, in his novel, *Roderick Hudson*, shows us a young sculptor coming two or three times upon an idea and then proceeding to mould his clay with great fervor and intensity. Roderick Hudson is constantly waiting for inspirations, or, as he calls them rightly, ideas. Young Hudson is not experimental, and least of all intellectual: he realized the futility of trying to produce a work of art without a valuable idea, but, instead of seeking ideas, he waits for them—and his tragedy is the result. When an artist begins to work feverishly, some little thing—a direction or some added element of experience—which was necessary to cause a new configuration has done its work. Certain experiences have



been thought about; the artist has felt a problem; he has had vague reactions about certain things; then, suddenly, merely a word from another, the sight of a neglected child in the tenement district, a love affair, or what not, organizes these feelings into a definite experience, a new interpretation. The artist may suddenly see a storm as a struggle of the gods, or as movement and becoming, or as the chaos of life—all depending on the direction he has assumed, i.e., the way his feelings about things are running, or the mood he is in.

George Eliot writes, concerning *Silas Marner*: "It came to me first of all quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen weaver with a bag on his back." The idea of *Silas Marner* struck her forcefully enough to cause her to lay aside the writing of another book. As she writes: "I am engaged now in writing a story—the idea of which . . . has thrust itself between me and the other book [*Romola*] I was meditating."<sup>3</sup>

Henry James, in his preface to *The American* (New York Edition), reports a similar experience: "I recall that I was seated in an American 'horse-car' when I found myself, of a sudden, considering with enthusiasm, as the theme of a 'story,' the situation, in another country and an aristocratic society, of some robust but insidiously beguiled and betrayed, some cruelly wronged, compatriot. . . ."

Often one gets ideas while writing: this happens because writing involves the enumeration of data, which helps to keep the facts better in mind. Ideas come

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (Harper & Bros., New York, 1885), Vol. II, pp. 203-4.



while writing also because many complex problems and many novels are made up of a series of configurations, or a series of solutions. The bridge builder has many problems to solve; the novelist may have many related but separate ideas in his novel. One configuration "sets off" another, and thus raises new problems. We therefore have the serial effect—one idea giving rise to another, and eventually giving rise to a large system of ideas which is a larger and more inclusive grouping.

No work of art is constituted entirely of subjective data. A novel, for instance, may contain much objective data, making it essentially intellectual. We cannot successfully classify all ideas and interpretations as either objective or subjective. Since configurations usually consist of both kinds of data, the classifying of interpretations is largely artificial and a matter of convenience. In designating the nature of any specific interpretation, the best we can do is to say that the data are essentially objective or subjective.

Something should be said also of the medium used for presenting ideas which are made up primarily of objective data, and that used for presenting ideas which are largely made up of subjective data. Our terminology for objective ideas is more adequately developed than our terminology for subjective ideas. This is true because our objective experiences are perceptions of our environment and consequently are of a definite nature. For this reason, configurations arising from objective data are best conveyed by language. Feelings and emotions, however, are vague, varying, and indefinite, and our language medium for the presentation of feelings and emotions



is therefore inadequate. Some interpretations can hardly be rendered in language alone; other mediums are often more successfully used. Thus music (which is very successfully used for conveying subjective data), painting, sculpturing, play-acting, and dancing are largely mediums for the arts. Often several mediums are combined, as in the opera. Poetry is largely a combination of music (rhythm and harmony) and language. Even good prose may contain the musical element, especially prose which communicates subjective data.

Although artists have many mediums, they are not content with them, for they find themes which they cannot express in terms of the medium they have mastered, and therefore attempt changes in their medium. The movements of Cubism, Futurism, and Impressionism are attempted additions to the medium of painting. Physical movement and feelings are difficult to convey by static lines and colors; hence a new vocabulary must be developed. Certain colors are made to represent certain emotions and movements. Irregular and exaggerated lines have other connotations. Modern artists are seeking new mediums of communication simply because they cannot adequately communicate with the old mediums. One must therefore know the language used by the artist before one can expect to understand him. To appreciate Russian poetry, one must understand the Russian language. For the same reason one must adequately understand the medium before one can expect to understand a painting, especially when such a medium is complex and a matter of much new conditioning that is somewhat opposed to an earlier conditioning.

Whether a medium is flexible and satisfactory is quite



another question. To attempt a new medium is not necessarily to express better one's mind: the medium must lend itself to the purpose; and it must be such that the acquisition of the technique involved in using the new medium does not require a conditioning which is unnatural or too difficult.

Because many new schools of art have arisen in late years, we understand that present mediums are not satisfactorily conveying the ideas that modern artists have to communicate. It indicates that they are seeking new mediums; that mediums are difficult to find; and that subjective configurations are extremely difficult to communicate.

PART III  
THEORY OF CRITICISM



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## CHAPTER VI

### THE IDEA IN WRITING

**W**HEN one characterizes a novel as good or bad, he may be referring to one or both of two things: the content or thought, and its presentation or communication. When further analysis is desired, a novel's content and presentation must be regarded separately, otherwise the critic's judgment cannot be understood by others. But such judgment, when specifically made of either content or presentation has little value unless it can be justified. To justify one's judgment necessitates argument based on something objective, otherwise one's judgment remains an opinion. Opinions may be interesting, but they carry no permanent conviction.

In order to solve our problem of evaluating literature, we must begin by postulating that anything which produces happiness is desirable and therefore possesses positive value. That is, happiness must be the consequence of anything which is to possess positive value. Unhappiness is a consequence of things which possess negative value. Things which have neither happiness nor unhappiness as consequences have no value. Thus if we wish to consider the value of a thought-configuration, we must consider its consequences.

The pragmatic attitude is always a prerequisite to the evaluation of everything. We must therefore ask what difference a thought-configuration will make if it is ac-



cepted or acted upon. It is often difficult to answer this question because one cannot always determine all the consequences of an idea; but having had experience with many ideas, one can generalize concerning some of the characteristics of a valuable one.

All artistic configurations, as we have argued in the preceding chapter, are compounded of objective and subjective data. When they are integrated and organized, thoughts or ideas are experienced.

As thought-configurations may be primarily constituted either of objective or subjective data, it is convenient for the consideration of their consequences to divide thought-configurations into *objective* ideas, or *ideas*, and *subjective* ideas, or *interpretations*.

*Objective Ideas.*—Truth seems to be an indispensable qualification of a valuable idea. A false idea will bring undesirable results if it is accepted or acted upon, because it will be inharmonious with accepted facts. To hold contradictory ideas is difficult, because they result in confusion, and one cannot accept contradictions and have accepted anything positive. Furthermore, if contradictions are *acted* upon, even physical pain is likely to result. A harmony of ideas thus becomes quite desirable. Truth may often *seem* unpleasant. Many individuals would regard it more pleasant to accept the Biblical version of man's origin than to accept the biologist's version. This opinion exists only because the consequences of the biologist's version have not been realized by such individuals. In ordinary life, man does not act upon the Biblical explanation; one does not expect miracles to happen, and therefore does not suffer from the contradiction. As the acceptance of the Biblical account is largely



verbal, and as many people do not see the relations between their experiences, they can accept contradictory things at different times, the interval of time being sufficient to hold the contradictory ideas apart. Others, however, are not so successful: they experience the contradiction and, if it is not straightened out, they may suffer seriously. Insanity is a common consequence of experiencing contradictions.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of the biological version result in a better understanding of the universe and mankind.

Thus it may be said that true ideas have more desirable consequences than false ones (i.e., ideas which do not satisfy a pragmatic test and are inconsistent, at the same time, with other accepted ideas). But this does not mean that all true ideas have positive value and that all false ideas have negative value. True ideas may have (1) obviously differing consequences, depending upon whether the ideas are accepted or rejected; (2) consequences which cannot be seen at the time but which are seen later; and (3) no consequences at all. Let us examine an example of each:

1. The idea of evolution is one with decided consequences. The consequences of this idea were seen almost immediately: some saw them as desirable, others as undesirable. Thus from its inception the idea was labeled both good and bad. As this idea was contradictory to other ideas, either it was false or the contradictory ideas were false: both could not be true. Needless to say, the

<sup>1</sup> It is well known that people have become insane experiencing the contradictions between religious principles and the situations found in actual life; it is also known that the feeble-minded do not become insane probably because (among other factors) they are not intelligent enough to experience contradictions.



idea of evolution is regarded as true today because it satisfies the tests of truth better than any other view that covers the same facts. The consequences of this view have resulted in a tremendous forward stride in all the sciences, and consequently in a better understanding of life and the universe. Even those who do not accept the idea constantly derive benefits from the fact that *science* accepts the view.

2. Ideas often lie unnoticed because their desirable consequences are not seen. Thus an isolated fact may be of tremendous consequence if other related facts were known and connected with it. When Mendel stated his laws of heredity, they remained unnoticed for many years because no one who had realized their importance had seen them. Until the consequences are seen, however, such an idea has no value.

3. A statement such as, "One rat runs faster than another," satisfies the test of truth, but obviously it has no consequences.

On the other hand, false ideas have either (1) undesirable consequences, or (2) no consequences at all. Hence they cannot be said to be valuable ideas.

In every case, however, one qualified to understand the consequences of an idea is the only one whose evaluation can be considered. The layman cannot evaluate an idea in science. A preacher, in his capacity of a divine, is not qualified to evaluate ideas in biology merely because he has an audience, any more than he is qualified to evaluate real estate.

Truth is entirely a relative matter. One idea works better than another and fits other facts better than another; and even the same idea does not always possess the



same status. Thus the atomic theory was true about fifty years ago, but today it is inconsistent with newly discovered facts: it does not work in the experimental situations which are now set up. Nevertheless the theory *had* great value. It explained the facts of its day, and its consequences were desirable in the history of physics. It was a necessary step toward the electron theory which is held as true today. In the same way, theories on the mind-body problem in philosophy had great value. Each one of the various ideas on the solution of this problem had different consequences, as well as being consistent with certain groups of facts. It made a difference which way one believed, and it was impossible to state, from the facts that were known, which view was the most truthful; but *each* played its part in pointing out difficulties and new aspects. Today the problem is regarded as man-created, and is therefore dropped. The naturalistic point of view allows no division between mind and body. In the face of present-day facts, this point of view is truer and more valuable; yet the past value of the other ideas cannot be denied.

What truthful ideas have the greater and more desirable consequences constitutes another problem. The ideas having greater and more desirable consequences are: (1) ideas with consequences which approach universality, and (2) ideas which are new.

1. Generalizations when acted upon have greater consequences than particulars. Whether or not the villain in a novel was killed by a train at the end of the story is unimportant. The consequences are merely that the hero and heroine lived happily thereafter and that the novelist succeeded in disposing of all the characters.



Whether or not villains in general are disposed of by the fates would, however, be an important problem if it contained some element of truth. In fact, such an idea is held by many people because the consequence of such an idea is the demonstration of ultimate justice. But since this idea does not stand the test of truth, it is regarded as ridiculous by people with wider knowledge.

Great pieces of literature raise universal problems, and the characters in them are used merely to raise such problems and to illustrate consequences. The characters are particular examples, but the problems raised are universal. In Greek myths and Wagnerian operas, the problems raised are such as to be handled only by giants and gods. The struggles of the forces in the universe could best be illustrated by having characters that were equipped to face such struggles.

It is very interesting, and profitable for our present purposes, to question individuals on their various likes and dislikes for certain novels. The opinions one receives on Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* serve as examples to show how some readers entirely miss the symbolism and the universal problem in the novel, and how others, because of a greater background and reflective tendencies, fully comprehend it. A cocksure feminist of the moral type, who lives every page in the most subjective manner, denounced the book in unvarnished terms: "It is full of the most degraded characters," she complained bitterly. "Such a book should be suppressed by respectable people; for see the terrible examples set for our young people!" She demands that people live morally, including herself. Since she lives every novel she reads, the novel must allow her to live morally. It is all a very simple



proof: for it does seem unfair for a novelist to request his readers to live degrading lives while reading his novel! Another reader who is essentially interested in "brilliant" conversation pronounced the novel as "Capital!" He was thrilled with the discussion of modern ideas, but failed to note their ultimate consequences. He enjoyed an emotional throb from the clash of ideas: it wasn't that he was interested in the import of the ideas so much as he was fascinated by the sparks that flew from their conflict. Still another reader saw in the book a great tragedy: it brought him, as he said, profound depression and melancholy. The tragedy existed in the absolute assurance of the individuals and their lack of consideration for traditional conduct. Yet another reader pronounced the characters as representing actual living types who think superficially and act upon that thinking: they are the pseudo-intellectuals who have escaped a thoroughgoing analysis of their civilization, and therefore lack a real knowledge or a desire for it.

Clearly the last reader caught the universal problem with which Huxley is dealing: his characters are particular examples which have been used to raise a universal problem and to illustrate the undesirable consequences of their superficial thinking in our complex civilization.

Mediocre literature deals with very particular incidents which have no consequence outside the particular case involved. We can close such a novel and forget it; when the novel is closed the problem is closed. Such things cannot live.

On the other hand, there are problems which are decidedly temporal. They have great consequences for limited groups, or in a limited period in history, or in a certain



locality. Such ideas have great value for those concerned, but on the whole they are limited in consequences. Nevertheless such ideas must be regarded as having value, and often they are important factors in the progress of a civilization or civilizations. In such cases the idea becomes universal, and to the extent that it does become universal it is valuable.

2. An idea which is already known can hardly be regarded as worth while because it adds nothing and hence has no consequences. To say a thing over again has no desirable consequences unless it is better stated, which allows it to reach a different and larger audience; or unless it is more clearly stated, allowing the consequences to be more easily seen.

We may then say that ideas are true if they satisfy, or are in harmony with, the facts which exist in their own time. The degree of their value is determined by their consequences. Since universal problems involve the greater consequences, they must be the core of great literature. Although it is impossible to judge entirely the consequences of an idea, they can be clearly indicated. The more thoroughly trained one is in any specific field, the more capable one is to predict the consequences of an idea in that field. And lastly, an idea to be valuable must be new; i.e., it must cover facts which have not been interpreted before in a similar manner.

*Subjective Ideas.*—Although it is more difficult to evaluate subjective than objective ideas, the criteria of one are applicable to the evaluation of the other. Thus a subjective, like an objective, idea must satisfy the test of truth. It must be consistent with other subjective ideas; or, being inconsistent with them, it must replace the older in-



terpretations and feelings about things with interpretations which, on the whole, are more harmonious with one another. An interpretation to be true must be consistent with other interpretations, all of which are harmonious with the fundamental drives of the human organism. Conflicting emotions have no desirable consequences. Because emotional responses have a natural basis, their growth and development cannot be in a direction contrary to the more fundamental responses of the organism. There must be harmony in our feelings about things as well as in our objective description of them. The development of character depends on the development of integrated systems of emotions.<sup>2</sup>

For example, an interpretation of God as a Being whom we must both love and fear cannot be emotionally true. Fear and love are emotionally opposed to one another. In love, the responses are toward the object loved; in fear, away from the object feared. Furthermore, love is pleasant while fear is unpleasant. Thus, unlike hate and fear, love and fear are emotional contradictions.

Since the emotional life varies in different individuals, it is difficult to find all individuals experiencing the same interpretation in the same manner. Various kinds of training tend to make the emotional life of different groups quite divergent, and therefore the truth of an interpretation may be limited to groups. Thus a certain interpretation of Christ may be consistent with the emotional life of one group of individuals and not with that of another. Yet the fundamental drives of the human organism are much the same.

<sup>2</sup> A. F. S. Shand, *The Foundations of Character* (The Macmillan Co., London, 1926).



To appreciate an interpretation that others enjoy, just because others enjoy it (for example, we may enjoy seeing the way the insane interpret certain things), is to deal with the idea objectively. We are not appreciating the interpretation directly, but rather are interested in the way certain people (e.g., abnormal people) interpret certain things. Such an appreciation or interest is an objective experience and it must not be confused with subjective experiences.

The consequences of an interpretation also must be desirable. It must make a difference to us whether or not we experience a particular interpretation. If an interpretation helps to develop and integrate our emotional responses to an objective world; if it breaks down conflicting emotions, or emotions which are undesirable, then the consequences are valuable. For example, many of us recognize that W. Somerset Maugham's novel, *Of Human Bondage*, helps many readers to integrate their emotional responses to their objective world through his interpretation of a character who has fought his way to such an emotional adjustment. Like most people, Philip Carey has naïvely assumed that his external world possesses the meaning of life, and consequently he believes that his happiness is dependent upon his success in extracting and adjusting himself to this meaning. Each time he feels that he has perceived the meaning of life, and attempts to adjust himself to that meaning, his organism revolts because of emotional conflict, the meaning vanishes, and he begins his futile search all over again. We find him therefore repeatedly attempting to wring happiness from his life by pitifully trying to reconcile certain diametrically opposed drives of his organism. It is only



when Philip finally learns that the meaning of life must emerge from his own integrated personality, instead of from his external world, that he achieves a permanent happiness. Presenting, then, an interpretation which so obviously helps the reader to integrate his own emotional life, *Of Human Bondage* has at least one recommendation required of all works of art.

The test of universality is also important. Religious interpretations, dealing with universal emotions, have been regarded as our greatest interpretations. A portrait or a scene is of little value unless the interpretation gets beyond particulars. A photograph deals with particulars, but the great portrait should bring out or crystallize some universally desirable quality. We do not react, then, to that particular thing which is painted, but to a certain trait or phase which is therein crystallized. Such a trait is one which human nature wishes to experience (which may be seldom or never found in a pure form in reality) and respond to emotionally.

An interpretation must also be new, for the same reason that objective ideas must be new: mere repetitions and imitations contribute little or nothing to literature.

It is seldom that one finds a great piece of art with nothing but an emotional appeal. Great works of art usually contain much objective data, because the emotions are directed toward and built around some objective experience. The subjective data are thus added to and enrich objective experiences.

Our emotions are vague: they vary greatly with different individuals, and there is no definite way of exhibiting their truth or universality. Subjective ideas are perhaps found in their purest form in poetry and music. We find



that one musician has great technique, and yet there is something lacking in his playing; while in another we are too engrossed by the musical content to think of his technique. The latter artist, we say, understands; he feels. One cannot adequately communicate an objective idea if it is not perfectly understood. No amount of rhetorical ability will make it possible for one to present an idea which is unclear and unpointed to oneself. If ideas are hazy, the presentation must also be hazy, even though one's technique is adequate. The communication of emotional experiences is no different; for one must understand a subjective idea as well as an objective idea if one is to communicate it effectively. By "understand" we mean that the integration must be experienced. A mass of objective data is without meaning to us unless it forms a unified whole, an integrated and organized experience. Subjective data must also be organized to form a unified experience. To have a mass of conflicting impulses is not to have a clear understanding of one's emotional experience any more than it is to experience a group of contradictory objective facts. Hence our interpretations must be pointed, consistent, unified, and organized. When we have such unified emotional experiences, we understand them—we feel something definite. And only when we feel this way can we communicate definitely. As certain integrations of objective data are unusual and desirable (appearing for certain individuals and not for others) likewise certain integrations of subjective data are also unusual and desirable.

Since language refers largely to objective data, it is not entirely an efficacious medium for communicating purely subjective ideas. Artists have therefore developed other



means of communicating their emotional experiences. When we hear music, we feel things that are difficult to verbalize: we seem able to talk only in circuitous ways about our feelings. An interpretation of love such as is given in Kreisler's "Liebesfreud" is quite different from one given in a Spanish tango. We experience in the first composition a love depending little on the sexual element, while the latter exhibits the sexual element as largely constituting the love experience. Both experiences might be very definite; yet the music demonstrates the difference far more adequately than do words.

In Michael Ossorgin's novel, *Quiet Street*, we find an excellent example of the point made above, to wit, that music can communicate subjective data incommunicable through language. Edward Lvovitch, a prominent character in the novel, is a creative musician in the deepest sense of that term. Ossorgin clearly brings out that Lvovitch interprets his world largely through sound: "Edward Lvovitch will finish [playing the piano] in a moment. It's almost melody now. All that he has tried to express is now reducing to a few quite simple sounds. Can it be that it's all so clear to him?" The listeners "tried to think of something to say, but there was nothing that could be said."<sup>3</sup> The musician had communicated an interpretation through melody that defied verbalization.

Again, near the end of the novel, after Lvovitch had experienced the disorder and complete reversal of human values which emerged from the sweeping Russian revolution, he writes and plays "Opus 37" which communicates the "meaning of chaos." Ossorgin writes:

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ossorgin, *Quiet Street* (The Dial Press, New York, 1930), p. 18.



The introduction [to "Opus 37"] was comprehensible enough and quite in accordance with the rules of composition; many works began in just such a way. There was logic too, and an intrinsic justification of the work in the opening. But the theme, scarcely yet hinted at and only just beginning to develop, was suddenly cut through—how explain it—by a sort of musical scratch, that went on to rip it from top to bottom. The theme persisted in its efforts to develop in the normal way and through its successive stages; but the scratch cut deeper, snapped the taut threads of the musical yarn, frayed the ends and jumbled it all into a tangled skein of tragic confusion. . . .

When Edward Lvovitch played through that terrible page he felt his worn old heart fail, almost stop; felt the stirring of his scanty hair on the nape of his neck and the slight twitching of his arched eyebrows. It was a criminal page; unpermissible. And yet it was truth, life itself! . . . Suddenly all the threads snap; the ends of the musical yarn drop with a distant echo and are all at once silent. The theme dies away—and something new is born, something which horrifies the composer more than all else: the meaning of chaos is born. The meaning of chaos! But can there be such a thing as meaning in chaos? <sup>4</sup>

Out of the musician's composition emerges an interpretation which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to represent with language patterns.

Thus a consideration of the nature of subjective and objective ideas leads us to the conclusion that the criteria for their evaluation are fundamentally the same. Because we are forced to evaluate verbally, it is more difficult to test the former than the latter with an objective standard.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

## CHAPTER VII

### TECHNIQUE IN WRITING

WE have already seen (Chapter IV) how the writer is permitted to communicate his interpretation of experience by skillfully arranging the elements of his configuration by means of language patterns. We are now in a position to consider in a more detailed manner the communicative medium. The purpose of this chapter is to furnish the specific criteria by which language patterns can be evaluated.

To know the importance of selecting the proper elements with which to formulate a configuration is to know the importance of selecting the most basic elements—words. Since no communicative medium is any better than its basic elements, the fundamental discipline of all literary communication is diction. Words are the elements of sentences: and since the meaning of sentences depends largely upon the nature of their elements, words must be chosen with a tasteful acumen appropriate to their importance. In the couplet,

I slipped up to the moon last night  
And sat enthroned in silver light,<sup>1</sup>

there are three well-chosen words. When we change them to,

I *went* up to the moon last night  
And sat *encircled* in *lovely* light,

<sup>1</sup> From an unpublished poem by Alice Maier Bone.



we recognize the delicately adjusted sense of diction employed by the writer in the first couplet. The word *slipped* is especially more appropriate than *went*; for in order to sit enthroned in the moon's silver light, one must obviously get to the moon, and to slip up to the moon seems more plausible than to ride, or walk, or merely go. The moon is a difficult place to reach, and slipping makes the journey seem incredibly fast and vaguely easy.

If the changing of a single word in a complete sentence pattern alters so definitely its meaning and plausibility, words are of primary importance in communication. The ability to choose words that will exactly communicate elements which, when properly integrated, will allow the reader to catch the writer's thought is perhaps the highest accomplishment in writing. For if the fundamental discipline of communication is niggardly applied, no degree of application of the succeeding disciplines can retrieve the loss.

Since every desirable interpretation of some phase of experience contains both objective and subjective data, writers have developed a definite language for communicating each type of data. I. A. Richards has labeled them the "scientific language" and the "emotive."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the diction of the language used in communicating objective data is primarily denotative; while that used in communicating subjective data is essentially connotative.

A word's denotative or connotative value is determined entirely by its use and setting, which in turn is determined by the direction the reader's mind has assumed. Writers do not employ two separate vocabularies; they use words

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1926), pp. 261-271.



either to denote specifically or to connote associationally. For example, in Patrick Henry's shouting, "Give me liberty or give me death!" the words *liberty* and *death* are surely highly connotative (or "emotive"). But if a scientist were to report that "unless these small fish are given the *liberty* of a large pond their *death* will be the result," the two words mentioned above would lose their connotative power.

Denotative words indicate precisely and accurately definite elements in the configuration. The word *denote* means to mark out plainly, or to indicate specifically. A word's denotative meaning is its literal meaning. They are essentially the symbols used by the scientist, the systematic philosopher, the accurate historian.

Connotative words suggest a meaning in addition to what we might term their primary meaning; they imply something additional; they are essentially suggestive, stimulating the reader to fill in many of the elements of the configuration for himself. Much of the effectiveness of poetry, the familiar essay, and fiction lies in their connotative diction. The immense value of connotative language to the literary artist can hardly be overemphasized; for without the efficacy of connotative effects there could be no literature.

Since it is more difficult to communicate emotional experiences than intellectual experiences, the artist's method of presentation must of necessity be more subtle and complex than the scientist's. Because of the indefinite and involved nature of our emotional experience, it is extremely difficult to analyze, and is therefore not easily described for the understanding of others. The scientist, in his attempt to objectify his experience and conclusions,



eliminates much confusion because he attempts to remove his emotional reactions. Since the experiences he describes are definite and exact, denotative language readily carries the load; but the artist, by the very virtue of the fact that he is interpreting and evaluating some phase of "inner" experience, is confronted with the involved problem of communicating not only objective data, but also subjective data. Connotative language has perhaps evolved to its present state because of our attempt to communicate our emotional life; for a definite language can hardly be satisfactory for communicating experiences which are too indefinite to be analyzed satisfactorily.

Although denotative language must be especially hospitable to current vocabulary, the connotative effects of language are best produced by the older words. And there seems to be adequate explanation for this condition. Although ideas may come and go, and philosophical systems may vary greatly with one another, human emotions remain rather constant. A word, then, which represents a fundamental emotional experience usually enjoys a long life, and, during its longevity, generally becomes rich in connotative associations. The words *soul*, *heart*, *genuine*, *love*, and even *truth* will probably never be dropped from the English language; and the longer they live, perhaps the richer they will become.

It is inconceivable that any discriminating literary critic should ever lose sight of the immensely important distinction between denotative and connotative language. Probably one of the fundamental faults of popularized treatments of science is their use of intermixed denotative and connotative language. And undoubtedly much verse suffers from a lack of poetic power because its language



patterns do not sufficiently arouse the emotional reactions of the reader.

In his search for economy of language and an effective means of emphasizing the important elements in his interpretation of experience, the writer finds a most desirable medium in the figure of speech. The figure used as a mere decoration has no place in literature; for it makes language an end in itself, a position hardly tenable in the light of all our previous discussion.

The value of figurative language lies in its ability (1) to accentuate, as desired by the writer, any element or elements, and (2) to indicate new relationships for purposes of description and explanation. When Irving writes,

The armchair is his throne, the poker his scepter, and the little parlor, some twelve feet square, his undisputed empire,

he is not only accentuating the importance of the chair, the poker, and the parlor, but he is describing these things by exhibiting new relationships: the chair is throne-like, the poker scepter-like, and the parlor empire-like, which makes them something more than an ordinary chair, a poker, and a parlor.

Figures are more appropriate for connotative language than for denotative language because they communicate attitudes and opinions rather than objective references. A figure used in objective prose is dangerous because it is difficult to employ it without encouraging the reader's mind to add connotative elements of his own which will pervert the precise meaning of the writer. The strict language of science is therefore almost completely barren of figures, while fiction depends to a large extent on their



capacity to arouse the affective reactions. When Conrad describes an old Chinese ship owner by saying that he "had a face like an ancient lemon," he did more with one simile than he could have done with a long analytical paragraph. By means of this simile he has not only said that the ship owner had a wrinkled, jaundiced, dried-up, medieval, depraved, bald, oval-shaped face, but Conrad, with a single stroke, has synthesized all of these qualities so that they are instantly transferred to the face as a whole. Because the common characteristics of a face and an ancient lemon are so widely separated and so numerous, a touch of humor is also contained in the simile. Humor, as we shall see later, objectifies and eliminates the emotional element in experience, and therefore with the same stroke the ship owner is denied love or hate from the reader.

A figure of speech fails as a factor in communication in one of two situations: (1) when the reader finds it impossible to make a rapid transference of qualities from one object to another; or (2) when there are no decided similarities in the two very dissimilar objects. A figure that must be contemplated and laboriously sifted loses most of its efficacy; for it then becomes a puzzle. Readers expect to find thought puzzling at times, but who is not reluctant to disentangle a writer's figurative language? Or any language, for that matter? Figures of speech facilitate communication only when the thing referred to in the figure is not only more commonly known, but when it is also more comprehensive, more clear than the object being explained.

Perhaps the second possible fault with figurative language, as spoken of above, appears with the use of figures



which fall short entirely. Llewellyn Jones quotes an unusually good example:

Truth has been decomposing for a long time, it seems, and Hearn is not the first or the last to complain of *the corrosions made on it by the advancing boots of time*.<sup>3</sup> [Italics ours.]

The idea that boots can corrode truth or anything else is startling, not to say confusing.

The fundamental value of the figure, then, lies in its unique ability to stimulate the reader to attend creatively to the page. That is, the figure evokes in the reader, by its method of comparing one thing to another, many elements not actually found in the language patterns. It therefore is not only an economical medium, but also one which demands a contribution from the reader in order to make the meaning of the passage clear and complete.

In a previous chapter we have demonstrated, by means of experimental data, that the meaning of the elements in any organization is markedly influenced by the meaning of the whole organization. The sentence, therefore, being the smallest meaningful organization of elements, does not escape this principle. Hence it is true to say that the precise meaning of words depends entirely upon the organization of the sentence in which they are imbedded. This will explain the demand, from Plato down, for the presence of unity in every intelligible work of art, including literature. For to say that writing demands the discipline of unity is merely to say that all of the contributing elements must be sequentially and coherently arranged in

<sup>3</sup> *How to Criticize Books* (W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1928), p. 49.



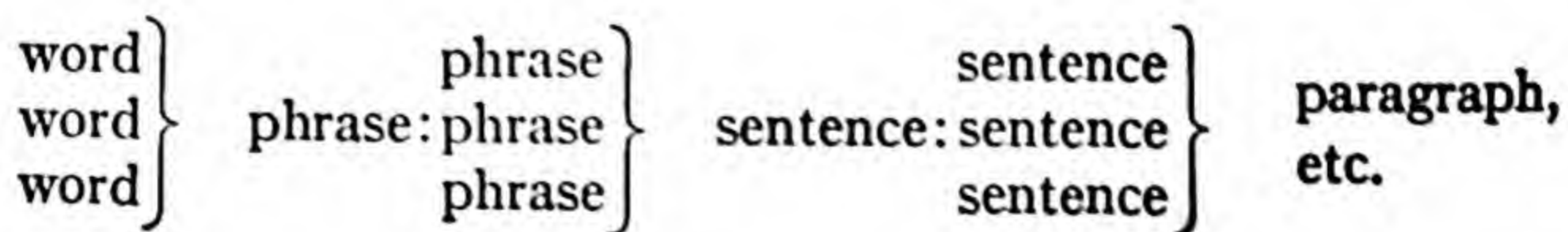
order to produce a functional, meaningful whole. To make a sentence meaningful, then, not only must the relevant elements be presented, but they must also be properly integrated. It is the effective integration of sentence elements which marks the good sentence: an integration made so effective that its meaning passes to the reader with the least possible interference and the most possible clarity. Therefore the value of the sentence is in direct proportion to its ability to escape detection as a medium, and to its ability to bring *in toto* the writer's precise meaning to the reader.

Although the words *candle-box*, *Atlantic*, *hove to*, *wallowed* and *Judea* denote things and actions, they mean nothing collectively. But when Joseph Conrad arranges them thus,

The *Judea*, hove to, wallowed on the Atlantic like an old candle-box,

they take on a meaning because they have been properly integrated. Only with sentences can a writer communicate meaning: unorganized words are not enough.

But the sentence has another function which is, in a way, a far more important one than the first. So long as a sentence is isolated, it remains a final configuration; but the moment it is used with other sentences in paragraph building, it serves as an element in the paragraph-configuration. Diagrammatically, the writing process appears like this:





What is true for the sentence is also true for the paragraph: isolated, it remains one configuration; used with other paragraphs, it becomes an element in a final, larger organization.

The act of writing, then, is a cumulative process—the building of meaning upon meaning in order to establish finally an idea or an interpretation in the mind of the reader. It is the method used in this process in which the critic should be most greatly interested when he evaluates the communicative skill of the literary artist. It is therefore the purpose of the remainder of this discussion on technique to describe the nature of *the integrative function*.

The various types of literature such as the novel, the drama, the short story, and the essay differ in extrinsic form; but because all forms attempt to communicate an idea, the integrative factor is functional in all of them. When this factor is obviously present, we have unity, but too often we merely state the fact of its presence without reference to its nature. Only recently has the science of psychology gone beyond the mere statement that our experiences are unified wholes and not clusters of elements. The Gestalt movement today differs from the psychology of the past in its emphasis upon the integrative process. In fact, recent experiments have been purposely pointed to bring out its importance.

One of the important features of an organization is its tendency to determine the meaning of its elements. Thus certain lines in a puzzle picture represent branches and leaves of a tree at one moment, and a face at the next. That the same lines may be first one thing and then an-



other is due to the particular organization we experience.

In writing, the sentence is an organic unity, and therefore the meaning of its elements also depends largely on organization. In a larger organization such as the completed novel we find this principle at work. Here the entire organization of the novel influences the meaning of the chapters, which influence the meaning of the paragraphs, which influence the meaning of the sentences. In painting we have a similar effect. The landscape influences the meaning of the trees, the trees its branches, and the branches its leaves.

In the presentation of an idea, meanings must be gradually built up. The reader receives only the elements at first. Each additional sentence thus influences previous ones. It is therefore very necessary that the order and arrangement be such as to lead to the final desired grouping.

In attempting to establish this final grouping in the mind of the reader, the writer must succeed in accomplishing two things: he must make the facts (the elements of the pattern) clear; and he must facilitate the proper integration of these facts in such a way that the reader gets the *writer's* interpretation, and no other. Hence the wisdom of the axiom which states that good writing is not only that which can be understood, but that which cannot be *misunderstood*.

The problem of the nature of this integrative process must now be considered. If meanings depend on the organization the elements possess, it is necessary that the writer be able to determine the integration. In our discussion of reasoning we pointed out that the subjects used in the experiments on human reasoning had difficulty in



solving problems because they could not integrate the facts related to the problems. After the experimenter had given them a direction or a certain way of looking at the problem, the solution came much more readily. It should therefore be clear that this function of direction is an extremely important tool for the writer to employ dexterously if he wishes his interpretation to be established.

The mind of the reader is not a passive thing: it is active and tends to organize elements. The nature of this active state will determine how the mind tends to organize elements. In one state of mind the same group of elements will tend to be organized in one manner, and in another state of mind the elements will be organized in a different manner. Thus when we are in one mood, certain remarks will insult us, while in another mood the same remarks will amuse us. With the use of direction, however, the writer can furnish the reader at the outset with the proper approach to the meaning of the work; and what is perhaps just as important, he can see to it that the reader maintains that approach, *and no other*, throughout the entire work. No matter how great the amount of factual detail that the writer commands, it will prove quite meaningless to the reader unless he is furnished with the proper direction to keep him to the mark of meaning.

Although men have attempted to produce definite rules for correct writing and have subsequently criticized writers for violating them, it must be admitted that the rules themselves have no ultimate authority. For such rules are only generalizations, and it therefore follows that all the rules cannot be applied to all purposes. Often the violation of certain rules will be the means of bringing about a desired direction in the reader's mind. The repu-



tation of Shakespeare's plays suffered in the hands of many eighteenth-century critics simply because this century was quite obsessed with the importance of "the rules." But Coleridge put aside such a superficial criticism when he wrote: "In nine places out of ten in which I find his [Shakespeare's] awful name mentioned, it is with some epithet of 'wild,' 'irregular,' 'pure child of nature.' . . ." <sup>4</sup> "The true ground of the mistake lies in the confounding mechanical regularity with organic form. The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material. . . . The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within. . . ." <sup>5</sup>

Coleridge is here insisting (as, indeed, he has also insisted in his *Biographia Literaria*) that literature is not to be judged by its extrinsic form, but rather by its intrinsic meaning. Unity in art is achieved from within, and is not brought about by superimposing rules on the method of communication. And certainly one of the inferences to be drawn from our emphasis on direction is that it is not the form of literature which is to be analyzed and evaluated for its unity or lack of it, but rather the *experience* which one receives from reading the literary piece. To say that a writer's work is bad because he has violated certain rules of writing, although the experience of the reader is integrated and valuable, is actually to deny the purpose of communication.

An examination of any work in any field of art will reveal the factor of direction at work to establish a general-

<sup>4</sup> *Literary Remains* (William Pickering, London, 1836), Vol. II, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.



ization. A painter attempts to arrange every detail of his picture in order to crystallize a universal characteristic of experience, which becomes his dominant idea. Perhaps nothing so adequately clarifies the controversy concerning the alleged formlessness of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* as the factor of direction. In critically analyzing this work, such critics as Hector Berlioz and François Joseph Fetis characterize Beethoven's technique as a kind of improvisation, meaning, of course, that he proceeds rather wildly and lawlessly. But such criticism can be put aside when the symphony is regarded as a functional whole, just as Coleridge put aside much of the Shakespearian criticism. If one sees Beethoven's symphony from Coleridge's point of view on Shakespeare, one sees it as being organically whole and therefore unifiably meaningful. Now it is this factor of direction which produces from within a symphony, or a painting, or a novel its organic form.

The *Fifth Symphony* has been chosen partly to illustrate the function of direction in an art closely allied with literature because of the controversy concerning its form: if it has violated so many rules of symphonic composition, how does it achieve its organic unity? On Beethoven's own authority we know that he "always worked to a picture."<sup>6</sup> That is, he attempted a representation of a unified idea in musical form, and, as Sir George Grove points out, "here we have the most concise representation [of an idea] that has ever been accomplished in music."<sup>7</sup>

This symphony represents a conflict between the individual and hostile forces, or Fate, out of which the indi-

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Grove, *Beethoven and His Nine Symphonies* (Novello and Co., London 1896), p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.



vidual emerges victorious. In the threatening chords of his introduction, according to Beethoven's own admission, "Fate knocks at the door." With these chords he prepares the listener for the approaching conflict; he is made to feel the threat of Fate, and the whole situation takes on a most ominous cast. Hence Beethoven has established in the listener a particular attitude of mind which tends to integrate in a meaningful way all the symphonic variations to follow. And we shall see how he never allows the listener to assume any other direction.

The hero, finding his happiness threatened, is forced to meet and struggle with menacing Fate. Having temporarily allayed his fears by avoiding Fate, there comes the soothing voice of the second theme. But this mitigation is only momentary; for Fate, ever knocking, knocking, again challenges the hero's contentment, which is Beethoven's way of maintaining and strengthening the listener's direction. The conflict becomes more imminent and intense as the hostile forces again make their advance. At length his soul emerges not only triumphant, but gloriously purified, and he becomes a better, more thoroughly integrated man because of the conflict. The theme of the symphony is that the effect of reverses and frustrations on a sturdy and determined soul leaves it more spiritually integrated than if it had encountered no obstacles: spiritual purification is facilitated through conflict, not complacent harmony. It is notable that only after three distinct and bitter struggles does the hero emerge victorious.

To arrive at Beethoven's interpretation, it is necessary that the various struggles be not seen as a series of conflicts through which the hero must pass, but rather he must be seen overcoming a fate which hangs over him on



all sides. *Fate is thus not a succession of threats, but rather a pattern of threats.* To experience this, the listener must be constantly aware of the presence of Fate, and this presence can only be maintained through the correct attitude of the listener. Without the proper direction in the mind of the listener, the final interpretation would merely be another victory over the last struggle rather than a final victory over the pattern of struggles. By seeing such a pattern, the listener achieves a meaningful unity, as indicated above in the statement of the theme. Despite the fact that Beethoven has violated many rules of symphonic composition, he has maintained his organic unity through the use of direction.

Perhaps the dramatist is more dependent upon the use of direction than is any other artist; for he is denied the use of so much of the technique employed by the novelist and essayist. Eugene O'Neill's successful attempt, in his *Strange Interlude*, to novelize the drama is clearly an effort to establish for the observer a more definite direction which allows concomitantly the inclusion of a more complex and subtle theme and sub-themes in the dramatic form. Because of O'Neill's desire to psychologize his characters minutely, he has them speak in extended "asides" which furnish the audience with an unusual amount of information for the dramatic form. Due to these extended asides and the unusual length of the play (nine acts), O'Neill presents a great amount of factual material. It is obvious, then, that so much material must be very skillfully integrated if O'Neill is to establish his principal meaning. The function of direction therefore takes on a very significant importance.



The theme of *Strange Interlude* can be put briefly:

O'Neill's characters, especially Nina Leeds, Edmund Darrell, and Charles Marsden, experience spiritual frustration because of an inevitable, unavoidable inner conflict in which they are willing, and to some extent unconscious, accomplices of their own defeat. This constitutes O'Neill's abstract proposition—a way in which, it is valuable to note, he attempts always to conceive his plays. His technique therefore is designed to establish completely this proposition at the final curtain. For purposes of illustrating the specific function of the factor of direction in such a technique, it will be profitable to trace the course of the play.

At the death of her lover, and later her father, Nina Leeds is left emotionally and intellectually disintegrated. And here O'Neill establishes his direction by furnishing a somber and tragic atmosphere. After hearing the heroine talk and seeing her act, we know, however, that she intends to struggle with the hostile forces in an attempt to wring from her life a little happiness. But through the presentation of his material, O'Neill makes us feel that tragedy is inevitable, especially through lines like this: "Everything in life is so contemptuously accidental! . . . God's sneer at our self-importance." And this: "The devil! what beastly incidents our memories insist on cherishing! . . . the ugly and the disgusting . . . the beautiful things we have to keep in our diaries to remember! . . ." Having put us in this frame of mind, O'Neill takes us into the conflict, after having made sure that our direction will integrate his material as he wishes us to experience it.

After Nina marries a man whom she mildly respects



but does not love, she learns, after a brief pregnancy, of a strain of insanity in her husband's family. Having submitted to abortion, she finds herself once more thwarted and disintegrated. O'Neill has strengthened his direction by showing us that Nina has been her own accomplice in her second tragedy. But her character is strong, and determinedly she continues to seek happiness for herself and her husband. Having been advised by her mother-in-law concerning the course to be pursued to achieve it, Nina decides to have a child by "a healthy male about whom she cared nothing." The consummation is to be loveless, objective, and scientific, an act to establish a happy family. This objective, though strained, consummation is effected with a young doctor, Ned Darrell, a rather close friend of both Nina and her husband. But from the moment when we first see Nina and Darrell coming together as potential mother and father, we feel that they have opened the way for another tragedy. We naturally distrust their ability to remain objective and impersonal in such a situation. Knowing their previous acquaintanceship with one another, and knowing the tremendous power of sex as presented in the play, we are suspicious, and consequently see these two characters walking into another trap, acting again as unconscious instigators of their own defeat. Hence O'Neill has maintained our direction, and we therefore see Fate, with its disintegrating, thwarting consequences, working itself more deeply into the drama. And so it is throughout the play: willingly, yet unconsciously, the characters are helping themselves to misery. In their very acts, designed to bring them happiness, they immerse themselves in tragedy. In attempting to get out, they only dig themselves in. By



having us see these repeated frustrations endured by characters who are attempting to escape them, O'Neill literally drives us to experience his interpretation: the cards are stacked against the characters before they even begin to play for their happiness; and the more they play, the more carefully they plan, the more surely they invite the unseen, uncontrollable, impersonal forces to crush them. It is because O'Neill causes us to maintain a single attitude of mind throughout the play that we link all together the series of events at the climax of the play, an act which enables us to experience his precise meaning.

We have pointed out that the importance of unity rests largely in the fact that the whole is essentially the determiner of the meaning of its elements. This being the case, unity becomes a fundamental discipline of writing. Furthermore, we have shown that a piece of writing is unified only when it is capable of producing a unified experience in the reader.

The principal determining factor in producing unity we have called direction. The concept of direction is the product of experimental psychology and is therefore more than a substitute word for well-known phenomena. It represents a dynamic process which tends to integrate experiences in a certain way. We have shown by specific examples how direction functions in art by producing unified experiences when extrinsic unity seems to be lacking. Direction therefore becomes the fundamental factor in the production of literary unity. The literary critic must therefore evaluate writing in the light of the experiential unity it produces. Further, he must examine writing to determine the extent to which the writer has skillfully

arranged his material, by means of establishing and maintaining the proper direction, in order to induce the reader to experience his (the writer's) interpretation, and no other.



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PERSONAL ELEMENT IN WRITING

**A**LTHOUGH the effective communication of a desirable idea by an adequate technique may seem sufficient to produce literature, even the most desultory reader recognizes the presence of another factor in all writing. This third factor, having to do with neither the central thought itself nor with the method of communication, necessarily enters into all literature. In every act there is an integration of movements which bears directly on the end to be attained. As one acquires skill in a specific act, this integration of movements becomes more nearly perfected. It is not enough, however, to consider only those movements necessary for the act. Movements which are not completely determined by the end are always present, and these are a matter of individual characteristics. Thus in a tennis game certain movements by the players are necessary to execute the plays; but in addition we can detect certain postures and movements, and certain facial expressions which neither improve nor impair the playing. We find that certain individual characteristics carry over from one act to the other definitely enough to enable us to recognize individuals by these extra characteristics. In describing the complete act, we cannot ignore these accompanying movements. Since we must recognize the whole of behavior in any analysis of it, all attending movements must be recognized irrespective of their im-



portance. It is because individuals differ hereditarily and environmentally that individual characteristics are present in behavior. The movements necessary for an act become modified to fit the end, and therefore characterize the end rather than the individual. But since the movements which have no direct bearing on the end are not thus modified, we find the individual characteristics exhibiting themselves.

In writing, as in other acts, we find the presence of certain elements which have no direct bearing on the end or the skill in attaining that end. If two individuals had the same idea and equal skill in writing, they would not produce identical products: there still would remain a certain amount of freedom which would allow for individual differences.

It is not quite true to say that two individuals could have the same ideas and feelings about things, with equal skill in communicating them. Differences in ideas and techniques are always present, but such differences have been accounted for in the two preceding chapters. The variations which appear independent of these and which characterize the individual's mode of handling his ideas and using his skill alone concern us here. Because such characteristics in writing depend upon the individual's freedom rather than on his ideas or skill, this third factor in writing is called the *personal element*.

Having recognized the personal element and noted that it is neither concerned with the idea nor its communication, can it now be dropped as unimportant? Unfortunately it cannot. The impressions aroused by a piece of writing are greatly dependent upon this factor; for two readers seldom have the same reaction to writing. We



cannot accuse a man of being a good or a bad tennis player because of the little things he does which neither improve nor impair his game. But we can say that we like or dislike seeing him play. Writing is no different: we like or dislike the little individual characteristics which creep into writing. If we are not careful, we may even judge the writing as good or bad on the basis of our likes and dislikes. This would be as unfortunate as it would be to judge a tennis player by the movements which have no direct bearing on his game. *It is therefore necessary to recognize to what factors in writing we are reacting when we are passing judgment.* It is for this reason that a complete analysis of writing is important. To judge a piece of writing as bad on the grounds of a weak idea has a defense which may be objectively stated. The same may be said of the technique. But when one reacts unfavorably to the personal element, he can only say that he does not like it. This is a matter of taste. One person may like the very thing that another dislikes. Argument about tastes is futile. One likes and dislikes certain foods and he need not defend his choice. One learns to like others and need not explain why. *But to judge literature on such a basis is to sacrifice all possibility of evaluation.* When we evaluate, we must have objective standards, and our judgments must be based on something more permanent and reliable than our tastes. One who judges books on the grounds of the first two factors can justify his evaluation objectively. One who judges on the grounds of the personal element cannot defend his preferences. He may be sure that he is right; he may say that he doesn't care what others think—that he is content. But he can never evaluate literature because



nothing can be objectively evaluated when the genesis of the judgment rests entirely with the individual.

It does not, however, follow that taste is unimportant. It is extremely important in our choice of books, and it is wise for the critic to designate his individual preferences, for others with similar likes and dislikes can profit by an indication of his taste.

It may be argued that that literature is great which has a pleasant "taste" for the majority of individuals. If such were the case, great literature would be temporal. "Best sellers" are not necessarily great works. Time is a better criterion of greatness than the popularity of a book. Writing which lives easily stands the tests of objective standards. Time eliminates judgments based on so fickle a thing as personal preference.

Taste in literature may, and often does, extend to the idea and technique, but taste can never defend them. These factors can and must be evaluated objectively.

We have thus far attempted to show (1) that the personal element is present as an independent factor which cannot be included under either of the other two factors; and (2) the contributions which the personal element makes to a piece of writing. It is still necessary to indicate how it enters a second time into a piece of writing.

A writer's first draft represents an integration of the three factors of writing. But generally the reader does not get the first draft; for the writer reads and judges his own work, and consequently makes many changes. The final product represents a selection made from the many alterations, which involve skill and the personal element. Although a writer's word sensitivity is a matter of tech-



nique, his characteristic taste and reaction to the functional whole are matters of the personal factor. The final product of the writer is, then, the fusion of the Idea, the Technique, the Personal Element, the ability of the writer to criticize his own technique, and his personal reaction to the whole.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WHOLE OF WRITING

**H**AVING discussed in detail the factors of writing, we are now in a position to examine the unity.

The whole of any given thing is never merely the sum of its parts. For the parts, having been fused, form a unitary organization which need have none of the characteristics of the parts. Writing, being a unitary organization, does not escape from this principle: it need not have the characteristics of the idea, the technique, or the personal element any more than common salt need have the characteristics of sodium and chlorine. To modify the totality one must change its elements, or differently integrate the same elements. Hence if one wishes to write or to criticize writing effectively, one must know the nature and the integration of the elements which produce the whole.

Inquiring treatments on literary style have been prolific and varied. In the past, most examinations of style have exhibited certain characteristics as being highly desirable; these have been arrived at by finding the common characteristics in desirable styles. The efficacious style, then, was one which could be characterized by such words as "clearness, force, and beauty";<sup>1</sup> or "sincerity, truth, courage, clarity, power, fitness, and beauty."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John F. Genung, *The Working Principles of Rhetoric* (Ginn & Co., Boston, 1902), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Paul M. Fulcher, *Foundations of English Style* (F. S. Crofts & Co., New York, 1927), pp. 3-17.



If we examine all of these characteristics, we find that some of them may refer to writing as a totality, while others characterize one or more of the elements (idea, technique, personal element) making up the totality.

For example, let us consider the quality of clearness. Writing may be unclear because the idea is not clear or because it is not clearly presented. In either case, to say that the writing lacks clarity is to say nothing definite; for the lack of clarity may be a characteristic of either or both of the elements. Likewise, to say that writing is involved is to evade the true situation; for involved writing is due to a faulty technique. Since good writing is the product of a clear idea and effective communication, no specificity is found in the label, "clear style." Moreover, to say that writing is forceful is to say nothing definite; for force may lie in an idea or its communication. But, unlike clarity, it does not appear in all good writing; for the purpose of every writer is not always to be forceful. There is nothing very forceful about a familiar essay: its tenor is leisurely and discursive.

Perhaps no criticism of writing is more nebulous than to characterize it as beautiful. Beauty is often a matter of technique: it may be dependent upon euphony, rhythm, figures, or sentence structure. In any case, it must harmonize with the idea. Beauty, then becomes a somewhat insufficient characterization of writing unless it is elaborated upon.

Style is often used to characterize technique, as is done in the old definition which maintains that "style is the manner of presenting matter." Since technique depends upon the purpose of the writer and the nature of his idea, this position is hardly tenable. To qualify writing with



standardized labels is to disregard its purpose and to make content unimportant. Since technique alone has never produced art, style must characterize more than technique. If style is used as a label for technique, it should be called technique to avoid confusion in any literary analysis.

Perhaps style is most often used to designate the personal factor in writing; but, again, any use of the term *style* to characterize one particular factor of writing as if it were a characteristic of the whole is to ignore the contribution of the other two factors. We are forced, therefore, to use *style* to characterize the whole of writing, or to drop the term entirely.

It seems, then, that the disagreements in the list of qualities and the profuse and indefinite discussions on style are the results of inadequate definition and lack of analysis. When we consider how these qualities have been deduced, we understand that they rest on no adequate foundation.

If these common qualities have been selected from good styles, it follows that good styles were chosen before the qualities were isolated. How were these good styles selected? What standard was used? Why should not this same standard, which is obviously more fundamental, be used in judging style rather than evaluating a new style by the common factors found in old styles? How could new and revolutionary styles be possible on such a basis? And who is to say when the selected qualities of style are complete and final?

It is apparent that the method of listing the "qualities of style" enlightens us very little concerning the true nature of writing. Any intelligent automobile driver can



list pretty well the desirable qualities of a good automobile, such as quietness, smoothness, power, speed, dependability, and economy. But when a manufacturer wishes to improve his automobile, he seeks to improve the factors upon which these qualities depend and to improve the integration of the factors. By improving the factors and their integration, the improvement of the automobile consequently follows. The understanding of the automobile, then, depends on a knowledge of its factors and their integration. And likewise a critical comprehension of writing depends on a knowledge of the factors of writing and their integration.

Now that we are confronted by the results of the foregoing analysis, it is difficult to understand the necessity for using *style* in any intelligent evaluation of literature. For writing can be analyzed, understood, and evaluated as a whole with no reference whatsoever to *style*. If *style* equals *writing*, then the exclusive use of *writing* will eliminate confusion. Our next question, therefore, is not what constitutes a good style, but rather what constitutes effective writing.

If the purpose of writing is to establish in the mind of the reader an experience of the writer, it follows that writing is good to the extent that it fulfills this purpose. When we term writing "good," we are speaking relatively; for a more effective integration of the three elements is always possible.

Because formulas cannot be laid down to cover each individual situation, good writing is difficult to produce. Writing can only be improved by varying the integration of the three fundamental factors until the desired effect is produced. Ernest Hemingway wrote the final chapter of



his *Farewell to Arms* some forty times<sup>3</sup> before he produced the effect he desired. Until he had integrated the three factors in relatively perfect combination, the desired effect did not appear. Having no formula to follow, Hemingway was forced to resort to experimenting with various integrations of elements. A knowledge of the nature of the elements should eliminate much of the trial and error in writing behavior.

A successful literary critic must be highly sensitive to the integration of the three factors of writing. And to be sensitive to this integration, he must first have a clear knowledge and appreciation of the objective data in the artist's configuration; that is, he must be able to evaluate the *factual knowledge* of the artist. For example, a scientific treatment of physical phenomena must be evaluated by critics with scientific knowledge. Many of our criticisms of contemporary biography are lopsided (and therefore quite useless) simply because the critics have no authentic knowledge of the historical facts. With what rational justification can a critic evaluate a biography of Plato if he has no adequate knowledge of Greek history, especially of Plato's age? Second, the critic must be capable of experiencing the artist's subjective data. Then in addition to being qualified to grasp the content, he must know the foundations of effective communication; and he must be able to recognize its degree of efficacy in presenting the artist's configuration.

It should be clear why good writing is so easy to recognize but so difficult to discuss intelligently: it is "felt" by people who are incapable of analyzing it; and they are incapable of analyzing it because they have no definite

<sup>3</sup> From a personal letter to H. Willard Reninger.



knowledge and sensitive appreciation of the factors from which it emerges.

The effective critic suffers from no such shortcomings: he evaluates writing from a knowledge of its factors and their integration, and not by applying a list of "qualities" which have been arrived at *after* good writing has been selected. Effective evaluation comes from the critic's own knowledge and sensitivity, and from an evaluation of each of the three elements which make up the whole of writing.

PART IV  
ANALYTICAL ESSAYS



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## CHAPTER X

### THE HUMOROUS EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

**O**F all our experiences, the humorous is perhaps one of the finest and most useful. The pessimist who is unable to go to religion for consolation would perhaps have no other escape from suicide. The optimist, on the other hand, is less in need of a sense of humor, and seldom does he have one. Since for him his way of seeing the world is satisfactory, he is not driven to find any mitigating solace in the humorous.

Laughter is often the product of the humorous experience, and is therefore often regarded as being closely related to it. Since there are other causes of laughter, however, we cannot regard it as a criterion of the humorous experience. In fact, one who laughs easily is often devoid of a sense of humor.

The literature on the subject of the humorous is rather profuse, but no satisfactory psychological theory is yet available. The existent literature has largely confined itself to pointing out certain characteristics in the various humorous stories: incongruity is perhaps the most generally accepted characteristic, having been first pointed out by Aristotle. Our present purpose is to study the mental processes involved in the humorous experience.

<sup>1</sup> The theoretical portion of this chapter is largely taken from Norman R. F. Maier, "A Gestalt Theory of Humor," *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. XXIII, Part I (1932), pp. 69-74.



No matter what the objective criteria of a joke are, it is not humorous unless a certain characteristic mental process is aroused by it. Classifying stories that arouse a humorous experience is therefore somewhat artificial, and theories based on the selection of common elements are likely to be inconsistent and unsatisfactory.

The findings of Gestalt psychology, combined with the results of certain experiments on reasoning, seem to explain the relevant mental processes of the humorous experience. Oddly enough, the present analysis found its genesis in the study of reasoning as presented in Chapter III. The principles of direction and configuration are the basis upon which we must erect our analysis of the humorous experience.

To illustrate how directions and configurations function in an experience of the humorous, we shall analyze the following story, which was told before the advent of the new Ford:

A gentleman, proud of his Ford car, was driving along the highway at about forty miles an hour. Suddenly the Ford's big brother, a Lincoln, asked for the highway with a blast of its horn. The Ford, not to be passed, "opened it up wide," somewhat to the amusement of the Lincoln driver, who remained behind much to the gratification of the man ahead. Just as the Ford driver's elation over his achievement mounted highest, the Lincoln dashed past with tremendous speed.

The winner stopped for gasoline in the next town and, being in no particular hurry, decided to wait for the ambitious Ford and chide its driver. After much waiting and anxiety, he saw the Ford limp in, its driver a physical wreck, with his clothes torn, face and hands scratched



badly, and dirty from head to foot. The Lincoln driver, greatly surprised, asked, "My Lord, man, what happened to you?"

"When you went by," panted the Ford driver, "you went so fast that I thought I had stalled my car, and got out to crank it!"

As the story is told, a definite situation is set up; we are led to think along a certain direction, and are suddenly presented with a problem. We ask ourselves, "What happened to the Ford driver? What *could* have happened to him?" We begin to picture solutions; but before we arrive at anything very definite, we are given the solution, *which is very different from anything we had suspected*. The facts in the case are presented in the story. The problem demands an integration of these facts into a satisfactory theory; but the direction in which we are led causes the right solution to be far from our mind. At the end of the story the facts of the problem are integrated, or explained. This integration is a new configuration and brings with it a new set of meanings.

Configurations appear suddenly, and are largely determined by the direction. Before the formation of the configuration, the facts do not fit together and are therefore meaningless: there is only confusion and chaos. Then in a flash—the moment of insight—everything becomes ordered and meaningful; order suddenly takes the place of confusion. And likewise in our story: the facts are not so placed as to explain what happened to the driver. So long as the problem is there, the facts are unorganized. Partial orderings, or groupings (attempted explanations along certain directions), are present, but none completely organizes the facts until the answer is given.



The new ordering, or grouping, gives a different meaning to all of the elements. As in all configurations, the meanings in this case depend upon the organization of data.

When the final configuration is experienced in a humorous situation, it is due to direct stimulation. That is, we are told the answer; we do not have to find it. In reasoning, the final configuration is found by the reasoner and is therefore in harmony with his direction. If the solution to a problem is not found, but is shown to the person attempting the problem, then the experiencing of the configuration is that of understanding. If the answer to the problem is not in harmony with the direction in his thinking, the solution comes as a surprise, and laughter often results. Suddenly finding the solution to a problem or having an unexpected answer shown to one is always pleasant, if the feeling about the consequences of the solution are disregarded. Thus far we have discovered that the humorous experience and reasoning or understanding are not unlike.

Not only must a configuration be formed in a humorous experience, but in every case the configuration must appear suddenly (as was shown in the above story), the listener or reader having been unprepared for it. A story is always weakened if the method of telling it allows one to anticipate the configuration. Because one can experience the suddenness of a configuration only once, a story cannot be funny a second time to the same person, unless new relations are again seen.

We can now easily understand how a clumsy method of telling a story may utterly ruin its effectiveness. Direction or association must therefore lead the reader off the scent: they must prepare the reader for anything except



the final configuration. Because the reader is unprepared for the final configuration, it appears very suddenly and unexpectedly: the moment he sees the point of a story he is experiencing the final configuration and its resultant meanings. Since he has been prepared for something else, the unexpected configuration is a surprise: for a moment there is confusion of thought, then suddenly the entire situation is clarified.

The importance of suddenness in the humorous experience has been pointed out by nearly every writer on the comic. For example, Kant<sup>2</sup> accounted for it by his theory of the sudden release of strains of expectation. Bergson<sup>3</sup> implies it when he stresses the machine-like nature of comic acts. Gilman<sup>4</sup> points out the necessity of the surprise element, but does not explain the nature of surprise.

Theories of incongruity also seem to imply the importance of surprise or suddenness. Incongruity generally implies lack of harmony between what we expect (on the basis of past experience) and what we see or what actually happens. This conflict between the concept and the percept appears suddenly. The story suddenly leads to an ending which is not in harmony with what was expected. There is thus incongruity between the beginning and the end of the story. Some writers make the final turn in the story lead us to nothing, or something without meaning, but such nothingness is determined by how it is related to other things. When we say that the

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik of Judgment* (Trans. by Bernard, London, 1892).

<sup>3</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (New York, 1911).

<sup>4</sup> Bradley Gilman, *A Clinic on the Comic* (Nice, France, 1926).



story ended in nothing, we mean that the end is not in harmony with the configuration which we seemed to be getting as the story was told.

If we say that the experiencing of an unexpected configuration is not in harmony with what we expected, and that configurations appear suddenly, then the present theory accounts for everything which theories of incongruity explain, without having the same limitations.

But the unexpected and sudden appearance of configurations is not sufficient to characterize the humorous experience. Understanding may involve these characteristics, and suddenness may arouse fear as well as a humorous experience. We must, therefore, seek further differences between the humorous and other experiences.

Bergson<sup>5</sup> points out that the content of humorous subject matter cannot be subjective; it must be objective. This seems to be a very important observation, although he leaves it relatively undeveloped. Plato, however, long before stated that wit and humor must be without pain. Later writers have also shown how certain emotions limit the field of the comic, but they have not insisted on pure objectivity.

It is possible to experience humor only when we do not sympathize, or feel, or implicitly participate with the thing we regard as humorous. To see an old lady slip and fall on an icy pavement causes some to laugh, while others feel only sorrow. Those who laugh see the situation as objective, and objectively there is no tragedy in the situation. Those who fear for the old lady's safety (her children, for instance) see the situation subjectively; their emotions are aroused, and for them it is humorless.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 139.



We can only laugh so long as our feelings and sympathies are kept out of the situation.

In a motion-picture comedy, the hero is thrown out of the window, and we laugh; in a tragedy, the hero receives the same treatment, and we are terror stricken. What makes the difference? The difference lies entirely in the setting in which such behavior is imbedded; and because of such differences in setting, our attitude in the one case is entirely objective, in the other, very subjective. In the tragedy, our emotions and sympathies are played upon, and we feel for the hero; in the comedy, we find no subjective content: we are aloof and merely look on.

If we ask people to tell humorous stories about their past adventures, we invariably hear tales of incidents which at the time of their happening were quite tragic. Our childhood, and even last year's tragedies, are suddenly funny to us as we tell them to evoke laughter in others. Time has removed the subjective factors, and we are therefore able to see the situation quite objectively. Yesterday's tragedy becomes today's comedy.

Objectivity, however, may also characterize productive thinking. In fact, productive thinking differs from creative imagination in that the elements of its configurations are largely objective. We must therefore seek for a distinction between the humorous and the reasoning experiences.

This distinction is found in the element of the ridiculous which is present in the humorous experience but which is not present in reasoning. This factor has been variously pointed out by different writers. For example, Kant<sup>6</sup> has the strains of expectation become transformed

<sup>6</sup> *Op. Cit.*



into nothing. Gilman<sup>7</sup> points out that the comic often contains a comparison between the possible and the impossible or probable. Freud<sup>8</sup> refers to the pleasure in the nonsense; and Sully,<sup>9</sup> to the play attitude in the comic.

These slight differences we wish to harmonize under the ridiculous and show that the ridiculous plays a part in all humorous experiences, not only in certain select cases. First, however, we must examine the nature of the ridiculous.

The ridiculous is logical only within the bounds of certain facts. It appears logical in a certain setting, but as soon as we get out of the setting and take other facts into consideration, the logic is lost. Humor, therefore, must be inconsistent with reality as a whole. Tragedy is not: it has no element of the ridiculous. Because the ridiculous has only a limited logic, it is easy for us to take it lightly. It therefore encourages an objective attitude. We do not take a ridiculous situation seriously because it is not meant to be a part of reality. A ridiculous explanation of a problem in a humorous story is thus quite out of the realm of our experience, and it is therefore less likely to be anticipated. The final configuration, the solution of the problem in the story in a ridiculous manner, can thus be experienced with marked suddenness.

While a story is being told, we are willing to accept any assumptions so long as they are consistent with each other. Thus we accept the fact that a man in the funny-paper is strong enough to lift a house or to hit another

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (trans. by Brill, Dodd, Mead and Co., New York, 1916).

<sup>9</sup> James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter* (New York, 1902).



on the chin and drive him over a roof; but a person with a logical sense cannot also accept the fact that this same strong man can be jerked out of a boat by a small fish at the end of his line. Such an idea does not harmonize with the other facts of the story, and therefore disgusts the intelligent reader. (If one enjoys such a comic situation, it is because he has not taken the story as a whole, but enjoys each scene separately. Each scene is a new configuration in itself.)

The humorous situation is thus only momentarily true for the facts presented; it must not be true pragmatically. The humorous situation is then a very isolated thing, and its configurations are not to be taken seriously. They are not to be refuted, and for one to try and refute them indicates that one is without humor. Thus when we say such an individual has no sense of humor, we mean that he cannot accept a situation as being only momentarily true. That is, he insists upon applying the pragmatic test to *every* situation. Productive thinking, although it may deal with an isolated situation, must harmonize with other experiences and data outside the bounds of that situation. Its configurations must be subjected to generalization: they must be true. Science deals with universals; these are profound and affect our lives. Although the elements making up configurations in science are often entirely objective, the configurations themselves arouse the subjective reaction. The configurations become evaluated, and evaluation always involves a subjective reaction. In that the contents of the ridiculous are isolated from reality and its assumptions willingly accepted, it resembles a play attitude. The ridiculous element of the humorous experience therefore accounts



for what Sully regards as the play element in the comic situation.

The importance of the ridiculous was definitely stressed by Kant when he wrote: "Humor in the good sense means the talent of being able to voluntarily put oneself into a certain mental disposition in which everything is judged quite differently from the ordinary method (reversed, in fact), and yet is in accordance with certain rational principles in such a frame of mind."<sup>10</sup> He also stated that "jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for the moment."<sup>11</sup>

Thus in the limited and definite sense in which the ridiculous has been explained above, humor differs from reasoning only in so far as it contains the elements of the ridiculous.

As humor so largely depends on producing the sudden configuration, the method of telling a humorous story becomes very important. One person may tell a story and get no response; another, telling the same story, may overcome his listeners with laughter. The one who fails does not properly present the story to produce the necessary wrong directions to secure the sudden final configuration. The environment in which a story is told is also important. The story which evokes laughter when told in a lecture hall is often an utter failure when told in conversation. The two situations are altogether different: the attitude of an audience is that of listening and following; each individual comes there prepared to set up the directions into which the speaker leads him. One follows less critically a speaker than a conversationalist,

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.



and the lecturer therefore finds it relatively easy to give us directions that lead us off the track. For example, Prof. A. H. Compton, in a lecture on "Light," told his New York audience that "Light is the darkest thing in physics. Unlike sound, it cannot be photographed." These comments "brought down the house," but did *you* laugh? The audience was prepared for a physical discussion of light, and these comments constituted a sudden turn. But you did not have the same attitude toward the word *light* that the audience had; that is, you did not have the same specialized meaning for the word and therefore you did not experience humor.

One's mood is also a very important factor in the humorous experience. One must be able to follow a story freely. When one is hungry, in pain, worried, or interested in something else, other stimuli interfere, and the stimulus-pattern which is to give rise to the humorous experience is unable to dominate sufficiently. Ordinarily, after-dinner speakers have ideal circumstances in which to tell their stories. The listeners have had a good dinner; the day's work is behind them; they have no particular worries; and, since the group is a social unity, all of the group suggestivity is present.

The humorous stories of various countries are also quite different. Aside from certain plays on words which do not hold in translation, there are other differences. The social and economic situations in a country greatly color the knowledge and attitude of its people. Our past experience greatly determines the direction we take in our thinking, and what may lead an American in a false direction will not affect an Englishman. Our past experience also determines what things we look at objectively.



If we take religion or politics too seriously, we are less able to appreciate a joke on them. There are also jokes that depend on certain temporal conditions to furnish the necessary meanings and associations, and temporal conditions are local. Stories not depending on such factors are, however, universally appreciated.

The above treatment of the humorous experience is somewhat abstract. In order to make it more concrete, it will be well to apply it to a variety of humorous situations. The humor in humorous literature, however, is often involved and in many cases loses in effect when an incident is isolated from its setting. It seems, therefore, that the application of the theory can best be made by an analysis of humorous stories because (1) it is easy to find stories that are definitely pointed to produce nothing other than a humorous experience; and (2) stories may be selected so as to be typical examples of other theories.

Before applying the present theory to a variety of humorous incidents, we may briefly summarize the theory as follows:

The thought-configuration which makes for a humorous experience must (1) be unprepared for; (2) appear suddenly and bring with it a change in the meaning of its elements; (3) be made up of elements which are experienced entirely objectively (no emotional factors can be part of the configuration); (4) contain as its elements the facts appearing in the story, and these facts must be harmonized, explained and unified; and (5) have the characteristics of the ridiculous in that its harmony and logic apply only to its own elements.



The following stories were chosen for analysis because they are representative examples of different theories. Each of the older theories seemed to explain satisfactorily certain types of stories, but was unsatisfactory for others. Furthermore, most theories include experiences that are not humorous. We hope to show that the above theory is adequate for explaining all types of humorous situations.

### I. MISLEADING "DIRECTION"

A city man was observing a farmer as he was feeding apples to his pig. The farmer had a very unique method for doing this. He tied the pig to the end of a long pole and then hoisted the pig up to an apple on the tree. The city man observed this process at first with amusement but later with some irritation. Finally, being able to stand it no longer, he walked over to the farmer and said, "That's a funny way to feed apples to pigs. It strikes me as very inefficient. Don't you realize that you're wasting an awful lot of time?" "Yes, I know," replied the farmer, "but what's time to a pig?"

The final configuration comes as a surprise. We are ready for an explanation of why the farmer uses this method, but what we get is an altogether different reaction to the question. He does explain the waste of time, but from the pig's point of view. The farmer gives us a new configuration, a new way of looking at the situation; and with the new configuration comes an entirely different set of meanings. The city man's question is answered, and the farmer justifies his action. The reader appreciates the situation objectively and sees it as an isolated case which has nothing to do with reality. Yet the facts of the story are taken care of in the final configuration.



## 2. MISLEADING PAST EXPERIENCE

It is much better to have loved and lost—much better.

In this example, the familiar quotation leads us away off the scent. "Much better" comes as a surprise, and for an instant we are confused, then suddenly we get the point with the total change in meanings. In the new configuration "much better" makes sense with the first statement. We feel no subjective reaction and therefore do not try to harmonize it with our ideas on love. Anyone who accepts the statement as sound wisdom, whether agreeing or disagreeing, does not fully appreciate the humor.

## 3. INCONGRUITY IN THOUGHT

Three soldiers capture one of the enemy and are holding him prisoner. During the course of the evening a card game is started and the prisoner is generously allowed to play. The prisoner seems to be the big winner. Sometime later he is caught cheating. His unsportsmanlike behavior angers the soldiers so much that they throw him out of the place.

In having the prisoner thrown out, we suddenly see a prisoner treated in a new and unexpected manner. We are prepared to see the prisoner dealt with for his ingratitude, but what we get is the proper treatment for a cheat. During the course of the story we are continually reminded that the man is a prisoner, but in the end he is a cheat, not a cheating prisoner. Treating the man as a cheat is, however, logical within certain limits, and we laugh before any logical inconsistencies are seen in the action. We have no sympathies one way or the other.



(To eliminate any subjective element, the story must be told without reference to nationalities.) The story is a unity within itself, and we do not care whether such things really happen or not. The direction in the story is furnished by our knowledge of what a prisoner of war is.

#### 4. INCONGRUITY IN PERCEPT

A dignified man falls in church.

Either the fall of the dignified man or such a disturbance in church is a comic situation. To see a dignified man and a church service suddenly mean something else is an unexpected and sudden configuration. We enjoy the situation if we do not sympathize with the man or are not too serious about the proper church atmosphere. Our new interpretations of the church and the dignified man are not permanent and real; they are only momentary, and for the moment the interpretations fit the facts.

#### 5. STORY OF EXAGGERATION

In the days of blunderbusses a man started out to hunt polar bears. On arriving at his destination he found that he had lost all of his shot and that only the powder remained. He had no sooner made this discovery when he noticed that he was about to be attacked by a large polar bear. This, of course, frightened the man and the perspiration quickly gathered on his brow. But the weather was so cold that the perspiration froze and formed large beads of ice. These he scraped from his brow, quickly chucked them into the gun, and fired at the bear. But the heat of the explosion melted the beads of ice and formed a stream of water. But it was so cold that this stream of water froze and formed a large icicle which pierced the brain of the bear, but in doing so it melted; and the bear died with water on the brain.



This story obviously fits our theory. The final configuration satisfies the facts of the story, gives the sudden change in all of the meanings, and also has the element of the ridiculous. Of interest is the serial effect of the story. We expect the story to end at several points, each time to some extent anticipating an answer but each time deceived because of the re-formation of the water. Then when the water is last formed we expect another link, but the bear died with water on the brain.

#### 6. NONSENSE STORY

As the fish was served to a guest at the table, he put both hands twice into the mayonnaise and then ran them through his hair. Being looked at by his neighbor with astonishment, he seemed to have noticed his mistake and excused himself saying, "Oh, pardon me, I thought it was spinach."<sup>12</sup>

Many would not regard this story as humorous. This is because it very seldom sets up the proper reactions. Only if we are led to anticipate an explanation of the man's peculiar behavior can we experience with suddenness his answer as an explanation. An explanation was necessary to satisfy the surprised neighbor, and the one that the man gives suits his nonsense behavior. It also gives the man's behavior a new meaning; we had sought a motive in it and suddenly find there was no motive. The man only "seemed" to notice his mistake.

#### 7. STORY WITH LOGICAL FALLACY

A man came into a barroom and ordered gin. When it was given him, he asked if it could be exchanged for brandy. "Cer-

<sup>12</sup> Cited by Freud, *op. cit.*, p. 213.



tainly," said the bartender, who willingly made the exchange. The man drank the brandy and started to leave. The bartender called to him reminding him that he had not paid for his brandy. "But," said the customer, "I gave you gin for the brandy." "Well, then, pay for the gin." "But I didn't drink any gin!"

This story usually produces a humorous experience. The conclusion reached is sudden and new, and the facts seem to be taken care of by the man's argument. However, if we are aware of the nature of the fallacy (the fact that the man could not exchange gin for brandy because he did not own the gin—rather that the bartender took back his own gin and sold the man brandy), the humor is lost. Its telling is humorous only if we temporarily miss the fallacy.

## 8. PUNS

Two men were discussing the ability of Samuel Johnson to make up a pun on the spur of the moment. One bet the other a certain amount that Johnson couldn't do it. So they went to the home of Johnson and tossed a pebble against his bedroom window; when Johnson appeared at the window in his nightcap, the following conversation took place:

"I've just bet my friend that you can't make a pun up on a moment's notice."

"A-pun what?"

"Oh," said the other, "upon any subject. Take the king for a subject."

"The king's no subject," said Johnson, and slammed the window.

Here we have an example of one pun that is a play on words and another that takes advantage of the double meaning of a word. In each case the context of the story



furnishes the one set of meanings while the retort gives us the sudden change in meanings. The second pun is made more effective by the slamming of the window. It adds snap to the story and comes at about the same time that we "get the point." Puns that involve words with double meanings are generally regarded as being of a better class. In their case the final configuration involves all meanings, not only word sounds.

#### 9. HUMOROUS RIDDLES

In riddles, a question containing a "catch" is usually asked. Thus: "What is it that you sit on, comb your hair with, and use to clean your teeth?" This question causes us to seek one object that will do all of these things. When we give up, we are told, "Why, a chair, a comb, and a toothbrush."

This answer satisfies the facts of the story, but not the use of the singular verb in the question. The singular verb gives us the false direction, and therefore makes the question have a "catch." If we appreciate the humor, it is because we are not at first aware of the fact that a singular verb was used in the question. If we are aware of the wrong use of the verb when the answer is given, then the facts of the story are not explained and we find the answer silly.

Both puns and riddles obviously satisfy the criteria of objectivity and isolation (i.e., the element of the ridiculous).

#### 10. STORY OF HOSTILITY

Wendell Phillips, according to a recent biography by Dr. Lorenzo Sears, was on one occasion lecturing in Ohio, and while on a railroad journey going to keep one of his appoint-



ments, met a number of clergymen returning from some sort of a convention. One of the ministers, feeling called upon to approach Mr. Phillips, asked, "Are you Mr. Phillips?" "I am, sir." "Are you trying to free niggers?" "Yes, sir, I am an abolitionist." "Well, why do you preach your doctrines up here? Why don't you go over into Kentucky?" "Excuse me, are you a preacher?" "I am, sir." "Are you trying to save souls from hell?" "Yes, sir, that's my business." "Well, why don't you go there?"<sup>13</sup>

This story satisfies the criteria laid down for the humorous experience. There is the sudden, unexpected configuration with the changes in meanings: for instance, preachers going to hell. The story is logical within itself, and, although it may apply to reality, its humor lies in the particular isolated circumstances in which it is imbedded. Our feelings do not enter into the story if we are appreciating it for its humor only.

This story is typical for theories of humor that make degradation of some one or the feeling of superiority a necessary characteristic. It contains the degradation of one individual, but the humor does not lie in this degradation. When degradation is an objective in a humorous story, it is made an opportunity to insult delicately but most effectively. It is effective because it is humorous: the situation is seen objectively, and the degraded one is therefore without our sympathy. The degraded has no defense; he cannot refute; the best he can do is to enjoy the humor and wait for an opportunity to retaliate later.

Humor is therefore an effective manner of attacking emotionally defended ideas; it immediately objectifies the

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Freud, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-2.



situation and frees it from the emotional elements, if, of course, the humor is appreciated. One enjoys a joke on a friend as well as on an enemy. If one's laughter is greater when an enemy is degraded, much of the laughter is due not to the appreciation of the humorous, but to the pleasure derived from our sadistic tendencies as well as from our sense of humor. Such theories, when applied to pure cases of the humorous, are quite inadequate.

Humor is cold and unsympathetic; it is not malicious, although it is a very adequate means of attack because it removes any sympathy that may be present.

We see that in the above group of very diverse stories the concept of configurations satisfactorily explains the humorous experience. The humorous experience has also been seen to be very much like the experience of reasoning or understanding in that the configurations appear suddenly, contain elements of an objective nature, account for the elements involved in the situation, and determine the meanings of the elements. But the humorous experience differs from that of reasoning and understanding in that the configurations must not be anticipated and that the configurations hold only in isolation.

## CHAPTER XI

### EXPERIENCING THE TRAGIC

**E**VEN from the time of Aristotle, attempts to explain why we enjoy the tragic in literature have been profuse, and at times not a little disappointing. Aristotle, Milton, Lessing, Santayana, and many others have given us their theoretical explanations, but no analysis seems to explain satisfactorily the enjoyment of the tragic. Because this problem is purely psychological, we feel that an attempted solution is pertinent to this book. The known facts that bear on its solution are rather limited, and therefore this analysis must necessarily be largely a matter of speculation. We desire, however, to have it consistent with the known facts, and, further, to have our speculation guided by careful introspection and observation.

Tragedy may be experienced in one of two ways: first, it may be observed objectively, that is, the observer may keep himself out of the tragic action entirely; and second, it may be observed subjectively, that is, the observer may become part of the tragic situation by sympathizing with one or more of the characters.

The first way of experiencing tragedy is pleasant: for if one is observing a tragic scene objectively, one is rationalizing the scene without emotionalizing it; and so long as the objective view is taken, one's sympathetic reactions lie dormant and therefore one cannot be ren-



dered unhappy. Ibsen's play, *The Master Builder*, is one which can be experienced primarily objectively by many people because of its outstanding intellectual content. Thackeray's great satire, *Vanity Fair*, is another piece of literature which easily lends itself to objective contemplation for the same reason. (In point of fact, satire, having as its principal factors criticism and ridicule, is always primarily intellectual.) All great tragedy involves problems which arise from the conflict of forces: the forces of nature, and the will of man. Conrad's *Victory*, Meredith's *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Hardy's *Return of the Native*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—all these great tragedies have as their motivating idea the conflict of natural forces with man. An objective observer sees the problems develop and sees the solutions take on logical sequence. The pleasure is the same as the pleasure experienced in any problem solving: the satisfaction is emotional, but the method is intellectual. One who observes a tragedy from the objective point of view demands that great problems be involved and that these problems be developed in a logical manner. To superimpose a happy ending on a story whose facts direct quite another conclusion seems an intellectual absurdity. It is for this reason that the movies are so severely criticized by the intelligent theater-goer: the masses, comprised mostly of naïve men and women who experience play production almost entirely subjectively, create a market for the movie with the happy ending. They demand that their faith in human happiness be supported or strengthened, and the producers meet that demand by showing them people living happily in spite of any adversity.

Exaggerated action, excessive emotion, and the like



offend the objective observer. For him, a plot that is not logical and not treated as a problem is not a tragedy: it is simply illogical—he cannot take it seriously. Longfellow's tragedy, *Evangeline*, is an example of the type of thing that an objective reader cannot take seriously from the logical point of view; for the two lovers wander for years in search of each other, missing one another in the most ridiculous fashion. The objective observer does not weep upon witnessing a good tragedy; he is thoughtful, and usually leaves the play or novel in a reflective mood. The plot holds his attention the same as any problem that arouses his intellectual curiosity: he experiences a great tragedy very nearly as he does an intricate problem in geometry. He judges the plot to be good or bad according to the value of the idea and especially the logical way in which the problems involved are treated. This type of interest is largely a matter of training, as is any other objective interest; it is a matter of technical and social education, experience, and reflection. On the other hand, the common run of movies satisfies the naïve man because he takes no delight in anything except his immediate emotional demands and interests. The educated man has an objective world whose problems he delights in contemplating and solving even though his solutions have no immediate, or even remote, utilitarian value. A great tragedy therefore holds him because it presents important metaphysical, psychological, and social problems which help to make more interesting his objective world.

There are two subjective ways of experiencing tragedy: first, the observer feels the struggle and seems to live it



as the characters seem to live or are living it. The forces in the tragedy are universal, and with the aid of his background the observer lives the struggle. This way of experiencing tragedy is undoubtedly entirely essential to a full appreciation. To speak of experiencing a tragedy exclusively from the objective point of view is only possible logically; for there must be at least a partial subjective experiencing of the characters' feeling and sympathies toward various dramatic situations and toward each other. In Butler's *Way of All Flesh*, it would be impossible to appreciate the universal problem involved unless one appreciated young Ernest's situation and his reaction against authoritative pomposity and stupidity. One appreciates the problem in Meredith's *Ordeal of Richard Feverel* only if one can sympathize with Richard's ordeal. This type of subjective experience is therefore not only highly desirable but is absolutely essential to the critic of tragedy: he must understand why the final situation is tragic to the characters involved; and to do this he must react to the final situation as the characters react to it. This subjective way of experiencing a tragedy is not concerned with the sorrows and reverses of the isolated characters, but rather with these sorrows and setbacks as universal tragedies which are merely represented by the isolated characters. Such an observer is not merely sympathetic with Richard Feverel's tragedy, but rather with the tragedies of all Richard Feverels: he sees the universality of the tragedy, not the isolated case.

There are those, however, who see and sympathize with the isolated case before them. This type of observer lives the lives and the experiences of the characters: he



grieves and weeps with the stricken character, even mimicking his facial expressions. Such an observer weeps for the isolated character's predicament; he sympathizes with the situation the characters are in and shares their emotions as suffering individuals, not as representative characters. As Thomas Rymer complains, "We laugh and weep with those that laugh or weep; we gape, stretch, and are very dotterels by example."<sup>1</sup> A play that has too much subjective content may "take in" such observers; that is, the emotional responses of the characters may cause great emotional response on the part of such observers.

The question now rises, Does the subjective observer actually enjoy tragedy? To some extent we may answer this question affirmatively. But to answer the question fully, we must distinguish sharply between enjoyment and being held spellbound, i.e., being very much interested. *Interest must not be confused with enjoyment.* When we are interested in a thing, we are unaware of ourselves and other things and the passing of time. Now tragedy truly holds one's interest: no effort of attention is required; our conscious state is made up entirely of our experience of what is going on in the story, plus the coloring of our emotional responses. Nothing extraneous enters, and there are no fluctuations of attention. But for one to be interested does not necessarily mean that one is enjoying himself: enjoyment is not a necessary prerequisite for interest.

The most important factor in causing one to attend to a tragedy subjectively (in either manner) is the arousal of sympathy and the emotions. Because an emo-

<sup>1</sup> *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693).



tion, when once aroused, completely dominates in attention, an observer who lives through a tragic situation is entirely or partly captivated. In fear, for example, the attention is dominated. It is unpleasant when the stimuli arousing it have real consequences or possibilities of consequences. The unpleasant effects disappear, however, if the stimuli have unreal consequences or are isolated and play no casual rôle in real life.

To captivate most effectively the interest of the observer by the arousal of emotion, a tragedy must present the common human experiences lived through by most of us. One cannot sympathize with things that are entirely out of the realm of one's experience. Mental anguish portrayed in a plot does not appeal to children or the feeble-minded; for them, sympathy is aroused only when physical pain or primitive forms of mental suffering are involved. A child will weep if we play on the emotions it has experienced. We may portray loneliness (e.g., showing a child who has no one to play with), or we may show pain and thus arouse tears. A child will stop torturing a cat if we tell him how badly the cat is hurt and point out to him that it is crying. Mother themes, loss of child, disgrace, etc., easily arouse sympathy. All of us have met and partly lived through such experiences; and therefore, before we are aware of it, our associative content is aroused and contributes to our sharing of the tragedy. Because this subjective contribution is necessary, it can be truthfully said that one must have suffered to be sympathetic.

Sympathy, however, is not entirely a matter of learning; it has a firm biological basis also. Squealing pigs will attract other pigs; a punished or sick white rat will



be tongue-licked by its cage-mates. Köhler<sup>2</sup> describes how a sick chimpanzee will receive tender and helpful responses from others who are greatly concerned with its condition. He also describes how one chimpanzee held his arm to prevent him from punishing another. Although these responses in animals may not be exactly what we call sympathy, they certainly are the foundations upon which sympathy is built.

Thus we find that tragedy grips us because we are sympathetic by nature. But we must recognize that it is not this sympathizing that we actually enjoy. The enjoyment comes later and is largely a matter of relief. After a strenuous tragic scene, we suddenly return to our own reality; the unreality of the tragedy makes this relief possible—it didn't really happen, after all! The relaxation is also pleasant, as rest is pleasant after a day of strenuous action. This reaction to the tragedy is sufficient if our subjective experience is of the mimicking type. If, however, we have experienced the tragedy as a universal conflict, we obtain a somewhat different type of pleasure. We have shared something with others and are therefore less alone. Our unhappiness is not only ours; it is quite universal. Our sorrows are the sorrows of life; and, because we are not alone, we feel comforted and refreshed. We feel that we are a part of the whole scheme of things.

Thus when we see a cartoon that pictures two women weeping at a movie, labeled, "Thoroughly enjoying themselves," we can hardly agree with the cartoonist's point of view. The women at this moment are not thoroughly

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Köhler, "Zur Psychologie des Schimpansen," *Psychologische Forschung*, Vol. I, No. 1 (1921), pp. 2-46.



enjoying themselves: they are quite unhappy, otherwise why are they crying? Not for joy, surely! But they are engrossed, and certainly not bored. When they later say that they "enjoyed" the movie, they will be describing their experience of not having been bored, plus the after-effects of having witnessed the movie, which we have shown to be pleasant. The people who say they have enjoyed *Hamlet* are simply describing their experience of not having been bored: they have been held spellbound; they have lived intensely throughout the entire play; they had lost themselves in the tragic action. But the enjoyment came some time afterwards with the relief from strain and their return to reality.

The experiencing of the tragic has been divided, for purposes of analysis, into three types of experience: the objective; and the subjective, which is divided two ways—first, that of allowing oneself to enter sympathetically into the plot and the characters' reactions, and second, that of mimicking. Strictly speaking, it is entirely possible that three individuals could experience tragedy in three different ways. Obviously the first way of experiencing tragedy, accompanied by no subjective appreciation whatsoever, would be most unusual: logically it is possible, but really quite improbable. Especially upon first witnessing a tragedy an observer would be quite unlikely to eliminate all his subjective reactions: perhaps after seeing it once he could return to examine objectively the logical sequence of the situations in minute detail. For example, the authors of this book have an acquaintance who reads part way into a novel, turns to the climax and conclusion, and then reads the middle of the book. He does this, he ex-



plains, to eliminate the emotional tension which has a very strong tendency to blind him to the logical sequence of the dramatic events. In other words, this reader, although he knows the value and necessity of sympathizing with certain situations and characters, also probably knows his own organism well enough to realize that a thoroughgoing objective analysis of the novel is very difficult so long as his emotions are too violently stirred. He therefore reduces his emotional reactions to a degree which does not interfere with his objective appreciation. But even in this case we recognize the contribution of the subjective experience to his appreciation. Only under the most unusual circumstances, with an unusual observer, is complete objectivity possible; nor, as we shall later try to show, is it at all desirable, except for specific and rather isolated reasons.

The second way of appreciating tragedy, with no objective contribution, is as unlikely as the situation described above. As has been pointed out, there are two ways of experiencing a tragedy subjectively: if the observer does not mimic the characters and does not completely submerge himself in the situation, there is only one other subjective form his experience can take, that is, allying himself not merely with the characters' sorrows as their own, but rather with their sorrows as *universal* ones. Now it is almost unthinkable that any observer who sympathizes with our universal tragic problems, through character representation, has no objective appreciation of tragedy. And here we come to the basic conclusion of this chapter: generally speaking, there are two ways of appreciating tragedy: (1) the objective-subjective way, and (2) the purely subjective, mimicking way. The sec-



ond is naïve, primitive, and almost entirely nonintellectual. The first is a combination of rational, objective analysis and a sympathetic subjective reaction to the emotional content of the tragedy.

Either manner of observing tragedy is pleasant. The observer of the first type enjoys the philosophical contemplation that the drama stimulates him to indulge in: he enjoys the contemplation of the problem and the author's solution of it. He delights in watching the representative characters battle with the natural forces. He reacts emotionally to the conflict and suffers, but not alone. He has the companionship of his kind, and companionship in times of stress is most pleasant.

The purely subjective observer also enjoys tragedy; but, as we have previously pointed out, his enjoyment comes after the tragedy has been witnessed, coming in the form of a relief from the emotional tension experienced while he was actually living the tragic events with the participants.

Although this chapter has now accounted for the appreciation of tragedy in two different ways, it would perhaps not be entirely irrelevant to point out the equipment necessary for one who contemplates setting himself up as a critic of tragedy.

It seems obvious that the objective-subjective manner of appreciating tragic action is the superior of the two. Great tragedy contemplates universal problems of great racial import. Since the subjective observer must, by his very manner of appreciating tragedy, miss the universal problems, he cannot possibly appreciate the most important phase of the author's interpretation. It then follows



that a critic must have something more than mere subjective reactions. And that something more is an objective, rational appreciation which will allow him to follow and finally evaluate the author's entire configuration or dominant idea or problem. A good critic's equipment must therefore include (1) an understanding of the fundamental racial problems, (2) a knowledge of the known facts concerning the nature of man and his environment, and (3) a capacity to appreciate and experience the emotional struggles of mankind. The first two will permit the critic to appreciate tragedy objectively (provided, of course, that he is objectively and intellectually inclined); and the third will permit him to appreciate tragedy subjectively. He will therefore be an objective-subjective observer of tragedy, an individual who will sympathize with the characters as representative types, seeing also the import of the great game between men and the natural forces.



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